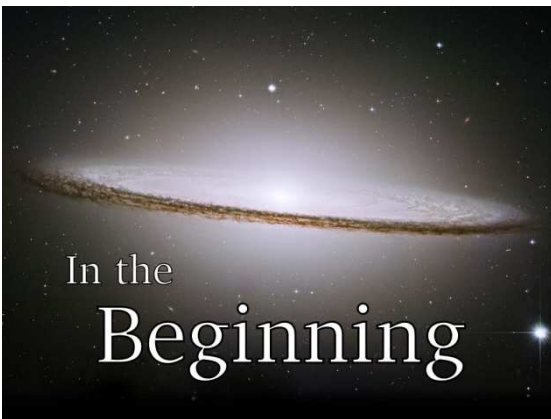


## WHOSE EARTH IS IT, ANYWAY?

Creation Sunday, June 5, 2016, at Pinegrove UC  
Scripture readings: Isaiah 24:4-12 and Matthew 5:1-10, 13-16

Probably the biggest challenge facing the world today is climate change. It's in the news every day, it's affecting everything and it's scary. Or maybe we've grown numb to it and don't really notice it anymore. A lot of Christians are not too sure what to think about it, or even if we *should* be thinking about it. They are more worried about the price of gas or Hydro. I believe it's important to understand what the Bible teaches us about creation. We need to know the "God Story" that tells us, this is what creation is all about. Clearly it's a pretty BIG story and very different from what society tells us, so really it would take a series of bible studies to do it justice, but today I'll try and do it in 15 minutes or less!



The story begins "in the beginning", in Genesis. It gives us some key insights as how things are meant to be set up and should be. In the beginning, God creates the sea and the land, and says, "It is good." Then God creates the plants and the trees, and says, "It is good." Then God creates the stars and the sun and the moon, and it wasn't just okay, it is good. Then God creates the creatures of the sea and the

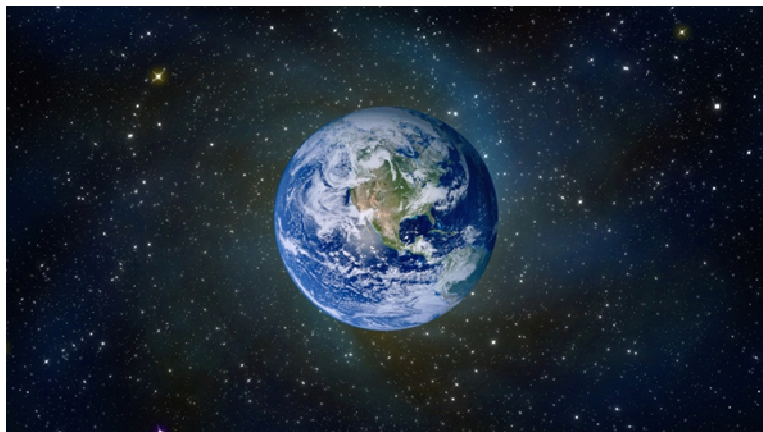
birds in the sky, and says, "It is good." Then God creates the animals that roam the earth, and again God says, "It is good." (Can you tell have a running theme here?)

God creates the universe and our world in it, and believes "it is good". God *enjoys* creation. And if God enjoys creation, then so should we. I love being out in creation and hope you do, too. Maybe it's out walking or hiking, maybe it's swimming or fishing - or maybe some you guys here are of the romantic type, and you went out into the garden to pick some flowers; you go to your loved one, and say, "These flowers are just for you." And she says, "Wow, they're lovely, thank you so much!"

And she takes them and puts them in the house for everyone to see and enjoy. It doesn't occur to anyone to ask, "Flowers?! What are *they* for? What do they do?!" Of course not. Flowers are fundamentally "good". You place them in your home, and people go, "What a lovely bouquet, those flowers are gorgeous!"

Creation is "good". Of course "creation" implies a "creator", what we call "God". And I believe that creation reflects what God is like. This "good creation" is not

inactive and just sitting there, it's full of potential. To the plants and trees God says to produce seeds and food, to the sun and moon and stars God says to go around to mark the seasons and the days and the years. And to the fish God says to be fruitful and increase. You got to love this picture of God blessing *fish*...



Like God self, the earth is not static, but changing and dynamic and active, and vibrant, full of life and rhythm. A living, breathing picture of balance. And in this picture of balance, God creates the first human being. And here God doesn't say "It is good". God says, "It is *very* good."

I just love that image of God creating Adam from this planet earth's dirt and dust. But then God does something special. God blows air into Adam's lungs and suddenly this creature made out of dirt comes with alive God's own breath. This "God story" makes a very clear connection between God and Creation - and us. Call it a "love triangle". We are part of that triangle, we depend on the land for the air we breathe, for the water we drink, for the food that we eat - and yet we are also made in God's image, with God's breath, God's Spirit inside of us. Our identity is made in God's identity. God and us, we share the same values! If God says this planet is good and enjoys it, and if God tells us to look after it and care for it (to *serve and preserve* is another way of looking at it), we are given an opportunity to partner with God. Think about that; what a privilege!

But most importantly, this story shows that creation does not belong to us. It's kind of like this: there's this 16-year old teenager, and his parents are going away for the weekend and entrust him with the house, to look after it. There are just 3 rules. First of all: no parties. Second, no friends staying over. And third, don't forget to turn the oven off. Got it, their son says, and off the parents go.

That same Friday night, the phone rings and it's a friend. Hey watcha doin' tonight? he asks. Oh, says the kid, I got the whole house to myself, why don't you come over? Two hours later, there's this big party going on with loads of kids all over the place. The house is getting a little bit trashed. By two in the morning some of his friends go, I'm getting really tired, the last bus just left, can we stay over for the night? "Yeah, sure, stay on over, why not!"

But no one's had any supper yet, so everyone's hungry. So they open the fridge and see all this food sitting there. They take it out, going, wow, let's eat this - and this - and this, too! Jell-O and meat pie at three in the morning, awesome!

The next morning, the parents come home early. You can just imagine their faces when they discover their home is a complete mess. More than that, there's kids sleeping on couches and beds, and worst of all: the oven is going full blast with nothing in it. Let's just say that parents were, well, *not* amused.

I tell this story because just as this kid had been trusted with the house, we have been trusted with this planet earth as our home. We have been given clear rules and guidelines telling us how to look after it. And if we break those rules, there are consequences. Things will spin out of control, as they do right now.

Throughout the whole Bible we hear God refer to the earth as "my land", God's land. Yet somehow we got this twisted, and we really believe that it belongs to us, that it's ours and that we can do with it as we please - when in fact we only have it on loan.

In the Genesis story, the first people, Adam and Eve, were told to serve and preserve God's land. But then they decide to ignore God's rules; they want to know, "what's in it for me?" It has a massive impact. God's balanced and good creation gets twisted and turned upside down. No wonder it's called the "fall from grace".

This fall from grace has an impact not just on our souls, but on all of creation. "Cursed is the ground", the God story says - cursed not by God, but cursed by our own choices. Labour becomes hard amongst the thorns. Death enters the picture. As we come from dust, we now go back to dust. Creation is thrown out of sync and can no longer fully reflect the God's glory. That special connection that there was between God and the people and Creation is no longer there. It's broken.

*That's* what the creation story in Genesis tells us. It's about how we fail to live up to God's mandate to serve and preserve creation, and the consequences it has. That theme flows right through the entire Bible, right up to us here today. We continue to ignore God's mandate and disturb the very balance that God has put in place.

We're full of greed and we like our convenience and comfort, at any cost. And so we take and we take with no regard for what it does to God's creation. As a result, the planet is suffering and in crisis. And so, people are suffering and in crisis. We have lost this connection with planet earth, we think we're independent of it; but we aren't. We've become separated from our environment, and it makes us unhealthy.

To give you just one simple example: in the winter, when it's freezing cold outside, we go into our homes and supermarkets and offices and it's absolutely boiling hot. But in the summer, when it's hot outside, our homes and offices and supermarkets are freezing; you're in your shorts and t-shirt, shivering with cold. We purchase pre-packaged, processed foods, and drive it to our sanitized homes in our air-conditioned cars - and we lose this connection with the earth that God has given us.

We badly need to re-adjust our perspective, and re-think what is normal. We have cut ourselves off from our own environment, and the implications of all this are massive. Picture the refugees. Not thousands, but millions of refugees all over the world are displaced because of torrential rains, floods, rising sea levels, droughts or fires. It is: bad.



Picture the smouldering ruins of what used to be a rain forest teeming with life. It is: bad. Picture the hungry as they become even hungrier as their crops continue to fail because of those unprecedented droughts, floodings, insect infestations. It is: bad. What God has created as "good", we are twisting and making it: bad.

God's heart is for justice and righteousness, our God speaks out for the weak and the poor. The weak shall be strong and the last shall be first, remember? Blessed are the weak, the poor, the suffering, we just heard Jesus say. Yet the impact we're having right now on the poorest nations around the globe is horrifying. And it's getting closer, as we see the same things now also happen here in Canada.

God's prophets get it. They won't keep quiet, they speak out on God's behalf to remind us that things should be different. We just heard Jeremiah rage, "The earth suffers for the sins of its people, for they have twisted God's instructions, violated his laws, and broken his everlasting covenant." Wow, he's pulling no punches!

We are failing God's heart for the poor and the suffering, and we allow climate change to continue. This picture of planet earth as good and balanced with this interconnected web of life has been twisted and broken.

Phew, a pretty depressing story, isn't it? And yet, God's story is full of hope. God is a God of redemption and second chances. Our God is a God of resurrection, defeating death and despair - not just for us humans, but for all of creation. When we think all is lost, there is hope - in God.

The Bible is full of those stories, stories of people throwing up their hands in despair, and God stepping in and saying, there will be no despair while I'm around! We are invited to participate in that story of hope and redemption. Because God wants us as partners; together we can do the impossible. Together, God and us, we can restore this creation.

Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth. Salt has to be *used* to be of any use. And a little bit of it can make a big difference. He also tells us we are the light of the world. Which is interesting, because we say the exact same thing about Jesus. But here Jesus tells us we are the Light of the world, too, together with him. So let our light shine for everyone, let's do what we're supposed to do!

It's also important for us to get rid of this strange idea that our time here on earth is only to prepare ourselves to go to heaven when we die, that it's all about a faraway heaven where a faraway god rules. That's nowhere in the Bible. In fact, the Bible keeps telling us that God is here with US; that *earth* - not heaven - but earth will be redeemed and restored. Both the apostle Peter and Paul write how much they look forward to a new heaven and a new earth. Heaven - on earth. God's will be done right here on *earth*, just as in heaven.

God's plan is to redeem - not just our souls, but *all* of creation. And we are part of that creation. If creation has an eternal purpose, and if God enjoys and delights in creation, and if God has given us this connection with the earth itself and God self, and if God loves the poor and the suffering... if we believe all that to be true, then climate change is a big, big challenge staring the church right in the face. Maybe a bigger challenge than anything else.

The church needs to rediscover its prophetic voice, and speak out and name the things that are wrong. And point to God's vision for this world, and God's hope that makes us who we are.

We all know Jesus' commandment to love our neighbour as we love ourselves, right? He wasn't talking about our next door neighbour, but the people with whom we share this creation. People in distant countries, refugees, but also people who are yet to be born, the generations after us. What kind of home are we leaving them?

If we are to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, then those neighbours have a fundamental right to enjoy creation, not suffer in it. And they also have a right to live off the land, to feed themselves. And yet, by allowing climate change we deny people this God-given right.

It's time for the church to rediscover its prophetic voice, to speak out about what's wrong - and to demonstrate in word and action a different way of living, to show that there's another way. When we do that, we'll discover that we'll become less self-ish, and more self-less. By changing our outlook we will be changed ourselves...

I challenge all of us here, just as I challenge myself, that there is still hope, that there *is* another way. God is working through God's church, but... are we making ourselves available? Or is that too much trouble, too inconvenient...?

God is taking the first step on our journey of the healing of creation, and is reaching out to us to join him. It's now up to us to show God how serious we are about our faith.

Amen.