

Kathy Cochrane: Creation – God Saw That It Was Good

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There has been some talk of late when one moves to this position on a Sunday morning of intimidation. Being intimidated by this august group or being intimidated by the “clique”. In my case adding to this the intimidation of memories and the ever-present intimidation of pain and exhaustion.

But there has come a time to face the intimidation. Perhaps to paraphrase the title of Susan Jeffer’s book *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, I can say, “feel the intimidation and speak anyway”.

As I speak today it is certainly out of a concern, gift and call that has permeated almost all of my life. Frequently during my time here our conversations have resulted in your comment to me “Kathy, you need to preach, or we need to hear a sermon on this.” My sense is that in all of those dialogues among us where I was sharing my perspective, I was either teaching, preaching or presenting visions of another way of looking at life and creation. But today, I make it “official” by starting to share with the community a theological perspective that includes creation.

This Sunday is also the Sunday before Earth Day – a time when

we pay attention to earth. This for me brings back memories of some 28 years ago when I was asked to speak at a Springfield high school by a teen I knew. I was asked to speak because to her and her family I was the first to introduce them to the word ecology. Interesting that in that talk I mentioned theological connections from Genesis.

The subject of creation is one that calls for theological reflection and action. It has long been overlooked or ignored in the church. At least in my lifetime and several hundred years previous to my brief walk here it has been relegated primarily to prayers or a statement of belief. But a sermon on the subject, rarely.

The aspect of creation that I'd like to look at is that portion of creation other than the human. It is this portion, the "other" which for hundreds of years has been separated out as nature. And unfortunately, in that separation – nature-creation has been seen as something to manipulate or exploit. That manipulation and exploitation continues in this moment.

Let us begin by looking at the verses in John 20, and from there, go back to the first chapter of Genesis. Verses 21 and 22 of John 20 say: *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, *"Receive the Holy Spirit."*

There are some interesting thoughts in these verses that speak to a creation/ecological perspective regarding earth.

Notice the use of the word breath. Here is that creative expression of life from the Spirit – the breath of God. This is the same breath of God – wind of God – Spirit of God – Ruah of God present in the first chapter of Genesis.

"A wind from God swept over the waters" is found in Genesis 1. Then God speaking – breathing – there is no speaking without breath – "let there be light." God breathing a beginning – over and over again.

This is the writer's description of the unbelievable mystery of beginnings – beginnings breathed by the Ruah of God. This is where the narrative of myth speaks to the evolutionary process of creation.

Here in the New Testament passage once again the mysterious breath-Holy Spirit is beginning the work – the work in us.

In Genesis the writer goes on to describe all of the acts of creation, always affirming, "God saw that it was good." The Spirit's work in beginnings hallows all of what is. The Spirit's presence in, with, and under all of these creations is seen as good.

The Spirit and work of the Spirit is spoken of in this New Testament scripture. Are we to *limit Holy Spirit's work to something less than the concept released in Genesis – God's Spirit creating all that is good?* Therefore the call for Holy Spirit's work in us in these days after this moment described in the New Testament is to be involved in the same work – seeing creation as good, working so that that affirmation continues in the life we live in creation. Therefore creation is fundamental. It is not just background. It is a place for our involvement participating with the Spirit in caring for all of creation which is good in God's eyes.

Doing theology in every age involves looking at Scripture, revisiting them, to see how Scripture calls us to respond in the day in which we live. It is faith and praxis. So let us look at Genesis and see how the first chapter speaks to us in this day.

In this chapter the narrator tells us seven times that "God saw that creation was good." In vs. 4 the light is described as good. In other verses it is simply a summary statement after describing particular aspects of creation – "And God saw that it was good." The final summary in vs. 31 is "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."

Note that the narrator repeats seven times the fact that creation in all its complexity and diversity is good.

This repetition tells us something. Remember the laws of repetition? To make a point the narrator is saying something very profound about God and creation – all of *creation* – *not just about Homo sapiens* – that all of creation is good.

This repetition points to the value that God places on all creation. Do we get it? Do we get it? Do we hear it? Do we hear it? Or, have we for too many centuries rushed on to see what it says about us?

In our rush to ignore and overlook these statements we have allowed ourselves to go along with culture rather than as people of faith calling culture to account in regard to creation.

The Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann speaks of it this way. *“The simple fact that the first page of the Bible speaks about heaven and earth, the sun, moon, and stars, about birds, fish and animals is a certain sign that the God whom we acknowledge in the Creed as the Father of Jesus Christ is concerned with all these creations, and not merely with humans. A God who is understood only as the god of humankind is no longer the God of the Bible.”*

We have not listened to the deep meaning of God seeing Earth and Seas as good. We have come to see these creations as only good for us.

But, you say – “well it says later that we’re supposed to be those with dominion.” Hold on my friends. Not until we comprehend the totality of all of Creation being seen and valued as good by God can we even approach comprehending the idea of dominion.

Seeing all manner of vegetation as good says something about God’s perception of ecological diversity. The ecological

diversity of earth – seen as good by God speaks to the fact that ecosystems function well and holistically when they function within the “good” system of the Creator. We are only now beginning to touch on the ecological interconnectedness of these systems. But our challenge now in this age is to see things as good without *our assuming that we can run creation better than the ecological and evolutionary systems that God sees as good.*

Furthermore, seeing these ecological systems as good implies their importance for keeping all of life together and good. Good earth, good seas, good vegetation, good swarming things, good birds etc. etc. says something about the necessity of the whole being interconnected with all of its parts. All are related to each other – from sun providing energy for the plants to produce calories so that any of the others, including ourselves, can survive. Each is dependent on the other. That my friend is a message we need to hear loud and clear because *it is not the message that we have been taught. We are not separate independent creatures. We are related and dependent upon the other systems – the other complex inter-related creatures and creations that God sees as good. To destroy any of these at the expense of the other is to ultimately destroy everything. It is a way of saying “too bad God, you may see this as good – but I don’t, so I will over fish the seas, destroy the forests, pollute the rivers, at whatever cost. And the cost is huge.*

This is our human inclination to put ourselves in Creator’s place – to say we “know” and can deal with all of this better than the created systems which are meant to function and change within the Creator’s concern for the relationship of all creation with each other – nonhuman as well as human.

Does it ever occur to us – does it ever occur to you that not seeing creation as good grieves the heart of God? Does it ever occur to us that we are engaging in something called ecological sin? It is a huge sin against the Spirit of God.

God seeing creation as good is a mystery to us. It is good period. Not good for something, not good for humans. We don't understand. We have not comprehended this good creation. God is pleased with the whole creative process. As James Nash says in *Loving Nature* quoting Conrad Hyers: *"Thus the ecosphere (indeed, the universe) is valued by the Source of value in all its moral ambiguity- -including the predation and prodigality that are inherent parts of the dynamics of evolution and ecology, including the inseparable intertwinings of beauty and ugliness, including the combination of destruction and construction in floods and quakes, including the ordered chaos in the structure of ecosystems, and including the it purposive randomness" with elements of creative chance structured into generally predictable processes."*

Good creation is also a dilemma at times. But perhaps the dilemma calls for humility. God sees as good deer ticks and Giant Sequoias, poison ivy and gray whales.

Seeing creation as good is also a matter of appreciating what is there, of paying attention. Of not just walking on by without observing or hearing or sensing what is before us and around us. This "And God saw that it was good" implies a whole lot of attention. In however a way God is, was and will be involved in creation, it implies an attitude of paying attention to detail as well as seeing how all of it is interrelated.

Looking at the verses preceding the third time the narrative in Genesis says that "And God saw that it was good" is the discussion of the vegetation – all plants yielding seed and trees bearing fruit. Our perspective on all this diversity is interesting. For most of us, plant materials are just background, or they are seen as something only for our use. This is true especially if we are looking at undeveloped areas that could be described as wild. But we might learn something about God and ourselves if we paid attention to even small wildness.

In the area where a number of us at another church were setting up a creation awareness center, I took a few of the people through the site – pointing out some of the species, speaking of their importance for other species like birds, their individual unique designs, and in some cases the fact that some of the alien species were endangering the habitat of this 31 acres. One of the women who participated in the walk remarked later that previously she had only looked at this as just “stuff”. Now, however she was seeing all of this differently. Paying attention is a way we can see and participate with the creation that is seen as good by God.

When someone begins to pay attention to something – one’s heart is touched or moved. Paying attention is an aspect of love. The seven times that glimpses of creation are described, as good, like the waters being full of swarms of creatures covers every thing from phyto-plankton to coral to mussels to whales. Seeing these as good is love that is beyond our comprehension.

This is the marvel of creation. The love of God creates a world as a habitat for all living beings, not just for humanity. God loves Creation. God paid attention to all of creation. We likewise need to incarnate loving creation, paying attention to it, in other words being ecologically responsible in our lives.

So how do we live this ecologically responsible life? This is where the verses in John come to bear again on this subject. We are now the ones empowered by Holy Spirit to move in this world doing Holy Spirit work. That work, my friend, is to include work for creation – supporting the whole of creation, which God loves and sees as good. This is far different from the attitude we have followed for centuries. It is an attitude of paying attention to Ruah and to Ruah’s continued breathing into creation. We are to be the ones, therefore looking out for, caring for what God sees as good.

So let us end this by beginning to reconnect God, earth and us. Let us begin to change our actions. Let us pay attention; let us begin to think differently. Let us turn ourselves around – mentally, emotionally and physically. I'd like it, if you are able, to stand so that we can involve our bodies in this new awareness. Let this be our prayer. I'll do it first; you follow along. Then we'll repeat it once more together.

Ruah of creation

Turn us around

Move us out

To see all of creation as good

Amen.