

June 11, 2017 – In the Beginning

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

I just came back from five days of vacation in the south west corner of this province. Marilyn and I spent time in Grasslands National Park, stopped at the Old Man on His Back ranch on the way to Cypress Hills and then travelled back through East End to spend a night at Pine Cree Coulee. On our last day we visited the Grand Coteau Heritage and Culture Centre in Shaunavon. It was a wonderful few days of connecting with the land and the history of this amazing corner of our province.

Every place we visited contained evidence of millions of years of planetary evolution, thousands of years of human existence and a couple of centuries of colonization. The T-Rex Centre in East End reminded us that great beasts that we call dinosaurs lived in this area 100 million years ago. Camping in the Frenchman River Valley reminded us that glaciers covered this land and gouged out wide basins 50 thousand years ago. Watching a bison bull charge across the road in front of us in Grasslands Park reminded us that for thousands of years First Nations people thrived on the prairie plains by hunting the huge buffalo herds that moved through this area. Touring the heritage exhibit in Shaunavon reminded us of the ingenuity and determination of the people who homesteaded here in southwestern Saskatchewan just over a century ago.

We live in an amazing part of this massive globe that we call Earth. A planet situated in a solar system that was created 5 billion years ago. A planet with an ecological history that goes back farther than we can even imagine. Scientists still spend their entire lives studying this planet, the solar system in which it spins and the universe in which it was created in order to determine exactly how its current form came into being.

But even before scientific study, as we know it, began, human beings came up with mythic stories of the earth's beginnings. Every culture had its own creation story. The version that Fran just read comes from the first chapter of the book of Genesis. This was the creation story of the Hebrew people and was probably developed around 600 years before Jesus was born. This story is based on a people's understanding of their God, rather than a scientist's understanding of his or her world, and yet the order of creation as described in Genesis is remarkably similar to the modern theory of evolution.

We may understand the Genesis creation story as myth, but in it we can find many truths for today. Of particular importance, is God's reaction to the world as it was being created. Over and over the story tells us that God looked at creation "and God saw that it was good." God created the dry land, the vegetation, the sun, the moon, the stars, the fish, the birds, the animals "and God saw that it was good." Then God made humankind and "God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed it was very good." The creation of our planet is a good news

story. Whether it happened in six days or over billions of years, the evolution of life is a miraculous and awe-inspiring tale.

And it has only taken a couple of centuries for one of God's most recent creations... the human being... to threaten the very existence of life on this planet. Scientists have been warning us for decades that our use of resources, our pollution of the atmosphere and oceans, our very way of life is destroying the planet on which we live. It is just in the past 15-20 years that individuals, corporations and governments have started to pay serious attention to this issue. And yet, we still have news stories like the one from last week, where President Trump pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

According to the Genesis creation story after humankind was created, "God blessed them and said, 'Bear fruit, increase your numbers and fill the earth – and be responsible for it! Watch over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things on this earth!'" The first request, to increase our numbers, we have definitely fulfilled - the current population of the world is estimated at 7.5 billion and continues to grow. <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/> The second request, to watch over all the living things of the earth... not so good.

When we visited Old Man on His Back last Sunday, we read about the slaughter of the buffalo, their near extinction and recent attempts to bring them back to the prairie. At Grasslands we searched for the endangered burrowing owl and in every field we passed by we scanned for the deer and that the antelope that

used to play on the prairie grass. Every once in a while we would catch a glimpse of these four-legged creatures, but mostly we saw fields of wheat and canola and pulses dotted with rocking oil pumps.

So what does it mean to be responsible for our earth? What can we do to make a positive difference? According to Joanna Macy, an environmental activist and scholar, the work that we must do forms a spiral, and that spiral has four major steps. *(next slide)* First, we need to open ourselves to gratitude for the earth on which we live. We need to spend time in the outdoors, open our eyes and our hearts to the beauty that surrounds us every day. Take a drive through the prairie, stop, get out of the air conditioned interior of our vehicles and breathe. Listen for the meadowlark, look to the sky for the hawk, feel the grass beneath our feet and give thanks for creation itself.

<http://www.joannamacy.net/theworkthatreconnects/the-wtr-spiral.html>

The second step is honouring our pain for the world, recognizing the impact of global warming, of excessive and destructive cultivation, of the use of fossil fuels, of plastics, of poisonous chemicals. It is allowing ourselves to feel the concerns that we have for our children and grandchildren and the world that we are leaving for them. Before we can make a difference we have to allow ourselves to feel and to own our pain. It is only when we acknowledge our own suffering that we can feel compassion for others and for the world.

The third step in this spiral is seeing with new eyes the possibilities for healing and growth that exist in this world of ours. The earth itself, scarred as it may be, has incredible healing powers. If you have ever camped, canoed, or even walked in nature you know what I am talking about. When I lived and worked in Toronto every summer I would drive five hours north of the city and spend a few days canoeing and camping in the healing beauty of Northern Ontario. I knew that I needed that connection with nature for my own health and well-being but what I didn't realize is that by healing myself, I was beginning the process of healing the world. When we open our eyes we see the many possibilities for healing and we see that we are not alone in that process.

The fourth step is going forth to try new things. The most important thing to know about the fourth step is that it's OK to fail. Every place that we visited last week was an experiment that could have failed. When they reseeded prairie grass at Old Man on His Back, they weren't sure that it would work. When they re-introduced the bison to Grasslands National Park, no one knew if they would thrive. When they built the T-Rex Centre in East End, it wasn't clear that anyone would ever come to visit. Behind each park, each attempt at conservation, every animal re-introduced to its natural habitat there is one individual who had the idea and who had the courage to tell someone else in order to move it forward.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. They are ours to enjoy and ours to care for. Let us give thanks for the beauty and the wonder of God's creation.