

Sermon: “On Creation” (Marge)

I find that, so often, when we talk about the environment it’s a slippery slope to despair, just as Kimmerer notes in our reading. So let’s start with some boundaries so we can all show up fully in this moment. We’re not going to go through a litany of horrors today. In this house, we don’t give terror or damnation the last word. I agree with Robin Kimmerer that despair is poison and with all the Black and POC organizers who remind us that despair is a tool of empire. So let’s align our spirits and our power with what the climate activist Joanna Macy calls The Great Turning.

To do this, we need to get clear about two things. One is humans’ relationship with creation, and two is our sense of the ultimate - maybe you call that god, maybe not.

I asked Kala to sing “Colors of the Wind” by Judy Kuhn today - it was made famous as one of the great ballads in the 1995 Disney film Pocahontas. It addresses these two questions, contrasting a white capitalistic colonial perspective with an indigenous perspective.

“You think you own whatever land you land on
The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim
But I know every rock and tree and creature
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name
The rainstorm and the river are my brothers
The heron and the otter are my friends
And we are all connected to each other
In a circle, in a hoop that never ends”

Kala will sing the song after this sermon. The song itself is enchanting and speaks to an idea central to indigenous traditions like Robin Kimmerer’s: *animism*, meaning the aliveness of the world around us. The full definition of animism from Oxford Languages is: one, the attribution of a soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena. And, two, the belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe.

I know every rock and tree and creature

Has a life, has a spirit, has a name
And we are all connected to each other
In a circle, in a hoop that never ends

A few weeks ago, when I preached on knitting, we talked a bit about this idea of humans' place in creation. I said this about the idea that crafts could be transgressive:

“I think the fact of those moments of protest point to something deeper. They point to a connection to our ability to create and I don't just mean in a cute crafty way, I mean in the sense that we are agents of creation. That we are powerful and uncontained. That we are of the world and in the world and we have the capacity to transform it.”

This question of whether we are of creation or over creation is a deeply theological one. There is a biblical idea, stemming from the book of genesis and that age-old story of Adam and Eve, that humans are to be stewards of creation. We are to be care-takers and contain the chaos - this became an especially popular idea with the rise of the English garden as a symbol of man's control of nature.

As we're hearing in Kimmerer's words and Kuhn's lyrics, indigenous perspectives take a very different approach. Humans are in a kindred relationship with all the other members of creation. We are not the stewards, but members of a vast family that is filled with innate wisdom. Our job is not to force nature into some kind of organized submission, but to do the dishes, to say thank you for the generosity of our kin.

I find this approach comforting, especially when we think about climate work. Because it changes the dynamic from our having to “fix” nature, to our needing to clean up after ourselves so as to not cause trouble for the family that is creation. That means we're not alone and nature is not our adversary. It means there is great wisdom all around us. And our job is to come back into right relationship, not to force a new and improved kind of order.

Kimmerer speaks to this disrupted relationship in her book, noting that there is

something called, “species loneliness” - a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. As our human dominance of the world has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely when we can no longer call out to our neighbors.” (p. 208)

Our task, then, is to find our way back into relationship with creation.

“The rainstorm and the river are my brothers
The heron and the otter are my friends
And we are all connected to each other
In a circle, in a hoop that never ends”

The second of our two questions, that of ultimacy, is also alluded to in these two different understandings of humans and creation. By ultimacy, I’m referring to another profoundly theological question: that which is of ultimate power in the universe. Ultimacy isn’t measurable. It’s outside our grasp. And yet, our relationship with the thing of transcendence has a profound impact on how we live.

We talked about this idea on Martin Luther King Sunday, when we listened to Amanda Gorman’s inaugural poem. I’ll repeat the question I asked you that day, which our Coming of Aegers have spent the last few weeks considering for themselves:

The question of faithful living is this:

To what do you commit your power? What is your north star? What is the ethic at the center of your life, what sustains you even when you can’t tell if you’re making a difference?

I think this is the question that so many conversations about climate activism fail to answer, which is why they leave us in a place of despair and inaction. When we focus only on disaster and tell a story in which destruction is the most powerful and inevitable thing in the universe, we are aligning ourselves with a certain kind of ultimacy. One in which nature is out of control and destruction is the thing of ultimate power.

In coming of age, we spent a session talking about different ideas of what God is to

broaden our understanding beyond that anthropomorphized angry white man in the clouds idea that so many people are rejecting when they say they don't believe in God.

We went through at least a half dozen different depictions of God and noticed that they all spoke of connection and of becoming. Even a trinitarian idea of God - the father, son, and holy spirit - means that God is comprised of relationship, a relationship that is alive. And when Moses saw that burning bush and asked God's name, God's response was "I am that I am" - a nonsensical phrase that essentially means the name of God is "being-ness." And if we return to that definition of animism that we started with, there is also the indigenous belief "in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe."

So what if the thing of ultimate power is not destruction, but creativity? Not despair, but a profoundly interconnected relational aliveness? Would that change how you live your life, change how you align your own power?

To my earlier point about creativity and the idea that we have the capacity to transform the world - I think what I failed to note a few weeks ago, was that being of the world means that transformation isn't something we exert onto an inanimate world. It's a relational change that blossoms from our own transformation. It's not about control or domination, it's about what Robin Kimmerer calls "mutual flourishing." And so we begin with ourselves, by examining our own theology of creation, those deeply held ideas about the natural world, and then deciding if we need to make some changes in how we relate to the world.

"I know every rock and tree and creature
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name
And we are all connected to each other
In a circle, in a hoop that never ends"

We'll end with these words by Kimmerer:

"Now I am old and I know that transformation is slow. The commodity economy has been here on Turtle Island for four hundred years, eating up the white strawberries and everything else. But people have grown weary of the sour taste in

their mouths. A great longing is upon us, to live again in a world made of gifts. I can scent it coming, like the fragrance of ripening strawberries rising on the breeze” (p. 32)

May we remember the names of our kin.
May we live, again, in a world made of gifts.

Blessed be and amen.