

Faith Mennonite Church
April 20, 2008 ~ Easter 5 / Earth Day

“God, who created heaven and earth, dwells with us”
Acts 17:22-31

The opening chapters of Genesis portray a poetic view of how ancient Israel understood human origins and the creation of the earth. In one version of the story, an orderly God brings forth form from chaos in six days and pronounces each stage good. In the other version, a more playful, creative God mucks around in a mud-puddle, forming *adam*, the first human from clay. In both versions God is in love with the world she has created and birthed. He breathes his own breath into the human forms, calling them to life.

Today we read this poetry informed by what some call the “new universe” story. Rather than a seven-day event, the universe in which we live has been dynamically evolving, scientists tell us, over a period of 14 billion years, and we humans, latecomers in this story are made of mud formed from stardust.

Someone has calculated that if earth’s history were put in a single year, we humans would have arrived on December 31st, just 10 minutes before midnight. And so, we need to ask: what was our Creator God doing during the eons before humans entered the story? If our universe is billions of years old, wouldn’t God have a deep and lasting regard for it? What might Creator think of the current predicament that humans have created: squandering resources, polluting the earth, and setting the stage for our very demise as global climate change reduces sources of fresh water for drinking and irrigation, limits food production due to increased droughts, and negatively impacts human health, particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Since 1970, people in the United States and around the world have been celebrating Earth Day on April 22, to raise awareness about environmental issues ranging from oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, to raw sewage, toxic dumps, and pesticides, to expanding freeways, loss of wilderness and extinction of wildlife. In 1990 Earth Day gave momentum to the recycling movement, and since 2000, Earth Day celebrations have focused on the need to curb global warming and seek clean sources of energy.

Given our belief in a God of Creation, it would seem that Christians would be on the forefront of earth care and environmental movements. But sadly, many western Christians have been some of the slowest and most reluctant to raise their voices and to take action on behalf of the earth. Several theological tendencies have shaped this outcome. As the early church moved from its Jewish origins into the Hellenized world it rather quickly became dominated by dualistic Greek thinking that elevated spirit above matter. In the modern period, some Christians have clung to a literal view of a seven-day creation at the dawning of human history. They view the earth first and foremost as a home for and at the service and disposal of people rather than a good in and of itself. This belief has meshed well with capitalist economics and principles of private ownership that view natural resources as productive inputs that can be commoditized at will rather than as the work of creator God’s hands that are intended to circulate and bring forth new life.

Fortunately many Christians are experiencing a new conversion and realizing that care for the earth and concern for the effects of climate change are directly linked to our care for other people. We are becoming increasingly aware that the effects of climate change are already having serious consequences and these consequences have a disproportionate effect on the poorest and most vulnerable people on earth. For instance, Lake Chad, a water source for five countries and 20 million people in Africa, is drying up because of droughts. In 1960, Lake Chad covered more than 26,000 km. By 2000, it was down to 1500 km.ⁱ

There seems to be wide-spread consensus in the scientific community that carbon emissions are the primary cause of global warming. The United States is the largest per capita producer of carbon emission in the world, having 4 percent of the world's population and producing more than a quarter of the greenhouse gases emitted. If we are to take responsibility to rectify this injustice, we must not only change our patterns of behavior but also lift up the voices of the voiceless—those in poverty, the elderly, and those of future generations.

When Paul visited Athens, he surveyed the city and saw numerous representations of popular deities. The Athenians were so religious, some would say superstitious, that they even created a monument to an unknown God. Paul, a visitor, was observant and seized the opportunity to inform the Athenians of the nature of their unknown God. The unknown God, said Paul, is the maker of heaven and earth. The One God, cannot be portrayed or contained in works of art, and renders all other deities irrelevant. This One God has given us life, and has entered our history through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This God does not want to remain “unknown” but desires everyone to seek and find the Source of their life.

What would Paul observe if he were to visit the Twin Cities today? What would he identify as our holy places, our deities, the things we hold most important? He might notice that newer homes have more entrances for cars than for people. He might notice that most everyone has a personal car, many of which could hold at least 4 passengers but during rush-hour congestion carry only a single occupant. He might notice garbage cans and dumpsters overflowing in city alleys.

But if he watched long enough, he'd notice Laurie and Matthew and Gerald on their bicycles...he'd see Joan and Noah putting out their curbside recycle boxes...he'd see Alisa and Andy, Gregg, Marian, and Melissa tending their gardens...he'd see Carol and Adam and Candace picking strawberries and apples and preserving nutritious snacks for our nursery children...he'd see David and Mark retrofitting old homes, making them more energy efficient, and he'd see Jerry switching out old incandescent bulbs and replacing them with fluorescents throughout our church. He'd see Greta and Michelle leading environmental activities in their schools and he'd stop in and ask them to tell him more. (Greta and Michelle share)

Joetta Schlabach

ⁱ *Lake Chad* www.wikipedia.org 20 Dec. 2007