



First United Church of Oak Park

Images of God

Genesis 1:27-31, 2:4b-9, 15

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As many of you are aware, Donald Trump recently rolled back the designations of two national monuments in Utah. The Trump proposal, which is being challenged in the courts, will cut in half the size of Grand Staircase Escalante, and it will shrink Bears Ears National Monument by 85%. From what I see on the internet, both of these monuments are breath-takingly beautiful; vast expanses of sweeping landscapes, intriguing geological formations, places that whisper of what Abraham Heschel might call the grandeur and mystery of living. They are spectacular.

There is, however, a great brouhaha that surrounds the question of whether to preserve or reduce the size of these national monuments, and that conflict has many stakeholders.

- Environmentalists are one set of stakeholders. They argue to preserve these national treasures in as pristine a state as possible, and many support the monuments for public enjoyment and edification.
- Native American tribes, whose heritage rests in these lands, comprise another set of stakeholders. They want to preserve these lands, and they want to safeguard the burial sites and historic locations included in both monuments. On the other hand, they recognize that tourism is a mixed bag; some tourists are respectful of these sites and others destroy them, whether intentionally or accidentally.
- Fossil fuel businesses are also stakeholders. Grand Staircase Escalante includes some of the largest coal reserves in the U.S., though that coal is deeply buried and quite difficult to extract. Bears Ears harbors oil and gas reserves, and is adjacent to some uranium mines, all of which promise benefits to the businesses that would like to get their hands on them, assuming Bears Ears were smaller.
- The great state of Utah is a stakeholder, too, as are its public school children. I learned that for over 100 years, Utah has funded its public schools by leasing land to oil and gas companies. With the proliferation of national monuments and other restricted lands in Utah, the land available for public school funding is shrinking, and these stakeholders argue that the monuments as originally designated are an overreach that hurts the children of Utah. This is the camp with which Senator Orrin Hatch affiliates as he argues to reduce the size of both monuments.
- Local populations get into the conversation, too, in their efforts to preserve and enhance their local economies and immediate environments.

So, there are at least five sets of stakeholders, all with their own self-interest, and different perspectives about the land, its potential uses, and how humans can and should have access to it. It's not simple. Every set of stakeholders claims moral high ground.

That human beings have different opinions about land, the created world, and our human responsibility within that world, is not a new phenomenon. Not even the Biblical authors could agree about those issues, as the two stories we read this morning from Genesis bear witness.

No one knows why it was that the final editor(s) of Genesis chose to put two creation stories into the book, back to back, right at the beginning. Maybe they were a committee and they had a tie vote. We don't know. Whatever the reason, we twenty-first century readers are left with two varying accounts of the creation of the

earth and its creatures. And, more relevant to us on Earth Day Sunday, we have two varying accounts of the place and responsibility of human beings in the created order. One could argue that these two perspectives are at the opposite ends of the conflict surrounding the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante monuments.

The first creation story, for example, is one that can be read in a way that gives humans permission to exploit the earth and its creatures.

The Bible opens with a chapter of astonishingly beautiful prose that describes God's six-day creation of the world and God's establishment of a seventh day of rest. In this narrative God creates men and women simultaneously, in God's own image, and gives us this charge: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge." Our role here is a powerful one indeed. In some translations we are given the privilege of subjugation and domination over the earth.

Although it is not the only way to interpret this text, some people have taken that very literally and acted as if we can do anything we want or can imagine to the earth. We can farm it until the soil is dead; we can cut down all the trees and turn them into something else we can use, like fuel or paper or lumber. We can genetically modify plants and animals and, dare we suggest it, humans. In the most extreme reading of this text, we humans are at the center of the universe, and we can do anything we please because we are the pinnacle of creation.

If fossil fuel bigwigs or proponents of Utah's public school funding process are looking for theological justification to extract minerals and fuel from the ground, they could find it in Genesis 1.

Environmentalists and Native Americans, on the other hand, might look to Genesis 2 for theological rationale for efforts to preserve and care for these beautiful landscapes.

The second creation story is quite different from the first. We find no record of 7 days here, and the order in which God creates life is different. Human beings are created sequentially, men first, and there is no mention that we are created in God's image. It is from dust, dirt, topsoil that God fashions a human being, just like we might fashion a figure from clay. God then breathes life into the human, who eventually gets the name Adam. Then God makes the Garden of Eden, where he puts Adam so that Adam can farm the garden and take care of it.

This is a different way of talking about how human beings relate to the created order, isn't it? Instead of mastering the earth and taking charge, the human is told to farm the earth and take care of it. Other ways of translating this suggest that we are to serve the earth, to keep the earth; we are to be attentive to it, to protect it, to guard it. The earth is ours to preserve, and nurture, and cultivate. Sierra Club members and Greenpeace activists might resonate with this reading of the text.

It is not, however, as idyllic as it sounds. Adam and Eve get themselves into all kinds of trouble, and their first two sons, Cain and Abel, get themselves into even more trouble, and within just a few chapters God regrets ever creating humans in the first place. The Bible recognizes from the get-go that as humans we are morally flawed. Selfishness, greed, and human curiosity run amok can destroy even the loveliest of gardens. And it doesn't matter which creation story you read for this to be true.

Last week I came across an article about two fifth century Palestinian rabbis, who wrestled with these stories in Genesis.¹ They wondered about two primary things. The first thing that confused them was something they saw in Genesis 1:26 - "Let us make humanity in our own image," says God. Well, who is this "we," the rabbis wondered, and they speculated about whether God talked over the creation with angels or a heavenly council of some sort.

The second thing the rabbis wondered about was why - when God knew that human beings were going to be so messed up, so morally flawed - why in heavens name did God go ahead and create us anyway. Guess what they concluded. They imagine that God said to whomever God was talking to, "Well, sure people will mess up. But sometimes they will do the right thing. Sometimes they will act with righteousness, with mercy, and with justice." And, apparently, the rabbis concluded that God created humanity because God thought that it was worth taking a chance on the good we could do, when we sometimes chose to do it.

These complementary narratives in Genesis remind us of a couple of things. They remind us, first, that we have incredible power as human beings. It does not always feel like it, but we do. We have powers of creation and destruction, of collaboration and conflict. We can and do have an enormous impact on the earth, our home.

At the same time, we have a responsibility to preserve and cultivate this beautiful garden. It is not ours, it belongs to God, as do we. And we are God's farmers, we are God's cultivators. God has taken an incredible risk on us. God has taken the chance that sometimes we are going to do right by the earth and its creatures. May the good Lord not be disappointed.

¹ Ryan S. Dulkan. "The Triumph of Mercy: An Ethical-Critical Reading of the Rabbinic Expansions on the Narrative of Humanity's Creation in Genesis Rabbah 8. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 33, 1 (2013): 139-151.