



Creation — The First Act of Grace

TEXT
Psalm 104:1–5, 14–23
Jeremiah 4:19–26

October 11, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

All through scripture, there are hymns of praise to God the creator. The prophets declare God is the creator. Isaiah says, “The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth.” The scripture tells the story of creation ... twice.

To say that God is the creator is as much a statement of faith as saying Jesus is Lord. It is a statement of faith, and it is a statement of gratitude.

The thing about creation is you take a microscope and drill down into the microscopic level, and it can amaze. And then you can take a telescope and try to look at the whole, which is impossible, and the sheer size of the universe is hard to fathom. The movie *Contact* tries to give us a glimpse of the size of our universe. Take a look. [Show film clip from *Contact*.]

I lack the brain capacity to comprehend what is out there. I wondered this week, how many stars are out there? Do you know?

The truth is, we don’t even know how many galaxies there are. Some say there are between 100 billion to 200 bil-

lion galaxies that constitute the universe. The closest galaxy to us is the Andromeda galaxy, and it is 2.3 million light years away. (A light year is the distance light can travel in a year. Light moves fast enough that it can circle the earth 7.5 times in one second.¹ So in a year, it can travel a long way!²) The most distant galaxies are 13.5 billion light years away.

The smallest galaxies include 100 billion stars. Larger galaxies might include as many as a trillion to maybe 10 trillion stars. So astrophysicists now estimate there may be as many as 300 sextillion stars — that’s a 3 with 23 zeros after it.³

Astrophysicist Charles Conroy of Harvard said we might imagine that number this way: The human body is made up of cells, on average about 50 trillion per person. If you add up all the cells in 6 million people, that’s about how many stars there are in the universe.⁴ That’s a lot of stars.

As Psalm 8 says: *When I look at the stars, the work of your fingers, what is humanity? How do you even find us? Why would you care for us?* A careful glance at the night sky can cause you to feel rather insignificant.

But the testimony of scripture is that we are not small. We are beloved by our creator. The bigness of God is not witnessed in God’s capacity to create, but in God’s desire to create. The scripture speaks of creation as a love story. Because creation reveals God’s desire that the world exist, that you live, creation is God’s first act of grace, God’s first act of love.

Psalm 104 is almost embarrassingly grateful for this gift of creation. *You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart* — as if to say, look at what God has done. We are alive. The world exists.

What greater gift could there be?

Praise of God the creator is a major theme that runs through the scriptures. There is another theme that runs through scripture, and it is the story of chaos. Chaos is the force that erodes life in God’s creation and in us. Chaos is first mentioned in the creation story: *The earth was waste and void, and darkness covered the waters.*⁵ Sometimes scripture

describes chaos as the reverse of the creation story. Rather than dry land emerging from the waters, the waters return and cover the dry land.

In Jeremiah, we read of a vision of chaos. It is the absence of water. The fields are desert, and the birds have gone. The problem is that the gifts that God had granted his people were ignored. The generosity of God was taken for granted, and so the gifts of God were lost.

Jeremiah says: *The earth was waste and void (the same words from Genesis); I looked at the heavens, and there was no light. I looked around, and there were no people. All the birds had fled.* The world has fallen apart — chaos.

We have seen the world fall apart this week. You all know that, years ago, I served a congregation in Columbia, South Carolina. There are people in that congregation who have been touched by the storms. The neighborhood in which Carol and I lived experienced significant flooding, with people's homes destroyed and all their possessions lost. These rains were unprecedented in South Carolina. They have no record of ever receiving so much rain in such a short window.

Many of those who have lost everything have no flood insurance because they didn't live in a flood plain until last week. This storm will produce significant human suffering and significant economic loss. And it will again raise ques-

tions about the climate. Some will wonder if these storms are more intense because the oceans are warmer.

I don't know. I know the oceans are warmer and rising, but I don't know how to calculate the connection to my old neighborhood flooding. But I do know that reports about climate change are around us all the time.

Just this week, I listened to KCUR's *Central Standard* with Gina Kaufmann. She interviewed Tim Crews from the Land Institute and Mykel Taylor from K-State Department of Agricultural Economics and Emily Akins from the Kansas City Food Circle. It was a full hour of how our food choices impact the environment. It is significant. The fact that cows eat more corn in this country than people do, and for every pound of beef somewhere between 8 and 15 pounds of grain is consumed, means that this new way of producing our food has environmental consequences.⁶ I believe that.

It's hard to imagine that what I choose for dinner has consequences for my neighbor, some of whom have yet to be born, but it does. Of course, the choices of what to do better are not black and white. There are no pure choices; it's a matter of trying to discern the lesser of evils, but still the choosing matters. I was grateful for the conversation on Thursday.

And then Thursday evening I watched the CBS evening news. (I'm still old school. I read the paper, and I watch the

network news.) There was a report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association warning that this year we will experience significant loss of coral reefs in the oceans. The oceans around Hawaii are hardest hit. The deaths are caused by what is called bleaching. It happens when the waters warm, and it doesn't have to warm much. The coral expel algae that are natural to them, resulting in the bleaching. If it is prolonged, the coral can die. The NOAA says that this year is the third ever recorded bleaching event, with others coming in 1998 and then again in 2005.

Coral reefs make up less than one percent of the ocean floor, but they are home to almost 25 percent of sea life species in the oceans. Jennifer Koss, the director of the Coral Reefs Conservation Program with NOAA, says we need to address the carbon levels in the atmosphere or the oceans' coral reefs will not be able to recover.⁷ The impact on the ecosystem of the oceans, and therefore on the global food supply, would be difficult to calculate.

The vast majority of scientists have reached a consensus on climate change. But there is still debate about the veracity of the scientific community's position. That's where we live with science these days. There are some who say the scientists are wrong on climate. There are some who question the science regarding vaccines. There are some who question the verac-

ity of the theory of evolution and insist that the earth is only 6,000 years old.

But we do know this. Carbon in the atmosphere makes things warmer. We need some, but the right balance is a problem. Too little and we freeze. Too much and we warm.

We have a telescope at our house, and I enjoy looking at the planets. They are all a bit different. Jupiter is the largest, and it's easy to see her moons in orbit. Saturn has her rings that are beautiful and amazing to me. Pluto was a planet when I was a kid, but 10 years ago, The International Astronomical Union offered a formal definition of a planet, and poor old Pluto got excluded. She's been fired as a planet and is not officially a dwarf planet.⁸

Venus is unique as well. The atmosphere of Venus is almost all carbon dioxide. All that carbon traps the heat of the sun so on Venus the temperature is a fairly constant 870 degrees.⁹ That's hot.

Carbon captures heat. Its presence in the earth's atmosphere is increasing. Some will say this is just a natural rise and fall, and I hope they are right and that the scientists are wrong. But if the scientists are right, then something needs to be done — and time is not on our side.

(Some of you will wonder perhaps, why am I talking about this? This is church. I'm not a scientist, so I shouldn't play one in the pulpit. I get that. This message certainly includes a lot of science, which

is not my field of expertise. But this message is really a conversation about ethics. And character can't be outsourced to experts. Character is about how we relate to others and to God's world, and it must be addressed and considered by ordinary folks and you and me. We have to choose the nature of our character.)

I know for me, my faith influences my thoughts about these matters. I believe that God is the creator. Because God is the creator, I see creation as a gift. And my motivation to care for this world is not only motivated by fear of the wrongs being done — as significant as I worry they are — but by gratitude for the good God has done.

Let me tell you of one of the silliest but strangely significant mini-traumas of my childhood. I was about 12 years old, and I wanted to join the Boy Scouts. There were some requirements. I needed a uniform, and I needed a Scout handbook, and I needed a sleeping bag. We were a single-income family, with my mother watching over four little ones. We were fine, but things like getting Scout gear were not in the family budget.

I told my parents that I wanted to join the Scouts, and they said that was wonderful. "We can go Thursday after school to buy the things you need," my mom replied. I heard them later that evening talking about the expense.

Thursday came, and we went to Sears. I got the uniform. I got a sleeping bag.

I got the Scout handbook. I came home and began looking through the book, and it had a page or two on stars. So after dinner, I took it outside to look for the Big Dipper, I assume.

The next morning, my dad when out to the car to go to work, and he found my Scout book on the hood of his car, where I had left it the night before. It had rained that night. He brought the Scout handbook, already falling apart, into the kitchen and left it on the breakfast room table.

I was hot with embarrassment. I felt I had let them down. I had showed a lack of gratitude for a gift. Now, I tell you, sometimes it's the silly things in our childhood that have a big impact. I don't wish to be casual about gifts.

Creation is God's gift. As people of faith, we should not be casual about it. Appreciate it. Enjoy it. Love it.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.

God has created life. The universe didn't have to be, but it is. You have life. It's too generous of God for us to be casual about it.

¹Earthsky.org, "How Far Is a Light Year?"

²Traveling at 186,000 miles per second, light travels 5.88 trillion miles in a year.

³These numbers are all estimates, and estimates can vary widely. I have taken these numbers from Huffingtonpost.com, “Number of Stars in the Universe Could Be 300 Sextillion: Triple the Amount Scientists Previously Thought”

⁴Huffingtonpost.com

⁵Genesis 1:2

⁶Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat* (2006), p. 232; Erik Marcus, *Meat Market: Animals, Ethics and Money* (2005), p. 255

⁷This report can be found at CBSnews.com, “NOAA Warns of Global ‘Coral Bleaching’.”; and also NOAA.gov, “NOAA Declares Third Ever Recorded Bleaching Event”

⁸Universetoday.com, “Why Pluto Is No Longer a Planet” This is a fascinating discussion about Pluto and other objects in its orbit that are larger than Pluto.

⁹Universetoday.com and Space.com, “Planet Venus Facts”

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.