

Earth Day Homily, All Saints' Garden, April 22, 2024

The Unity of All Creation

Where did this home of ours, the Earth, come from? How did our natural world come to be? Where did we humanity come from? How did our consciousness and with it our desire to comprehend the universe and its creator come to be? And appropriate for today Earth Day how did we reach this point of crisis in this ongoing evolutionary process of life on this beautiful home of ours?

Let's step back in time, in fact way back, to what now through our scientific methods is our best understanding of our origin. It all began about 13.7 billion years ago. In his book The First Three Minutes the Nobel-peace prize physicist Steven Weinberg (1) tells us it began with a tremendous explosion of energy filling what then became rapidly expanding space. At about one-hundredth of a second the temperature was about two hundred billion degrees. Matter at this point consisted of elementary particles which included electrons and later photons, and the universe was filled with light. This took about one-tenth of a second. After three minutes the universe cooled to about two billion degrees. Then, after a few hundred thousand years it was cool enough for gases of hydrogen and helium to form, and that gas under the influence of gravity began to condense and clump together to form the galaxies and stars of the still ever expanding present universe. Incredibly the ingredients with which the stars would begin their life and ultimately our lives would be just those prepared in the first three minutes. Over billions of years galaxies formed, supernova stars exploded releasing elements into the universe, and about 5 billion years ago the solar system and earth were born of the particles cast out into space by these exploding stars. Earth was born amidst this unfathomable universe of energy and new life. Plant and animal life formed in the primordial seas about 3 billion years ago, and plants emerged onto land about 600 million years ago. Luxuriant foliage developed. One hundred million years ago flowers appeared, and the full beauty of Earth began to manifest itself. Birds appeared, and later mammals,

both on land and in the sea. And then the evolutionary process brought about the human mode of being, with the development of a consciousness that allowed the earth to reflect upon itself, humanity as the means for this living organism Earth to awaken to an intellectual understanding of itself. Awe and mystery and search for meaning led to the development humanity's attempts to connect with the creator, first within indigenous people, and later with the development of religious traditions. Then just a few centuries ago a new stage of scientific development took place, which brought about a technological dominance of the earth out of which humanity had emerged. Sadly and tragically the consequent ability of humans to affect the functioning of the planet Earth has had disastrous consequences, and that is where we find ourselves today. (2) It has been quite the journey. Where do we go next?

I tell this creation story as a background to where I am headed with this homily titled "The Unity of Creation." I tell it in the hope that it helps us to understand the foundational truth that the universe itself—the universe as the expression and revelation of the Creator—is the reference point, that being the criterion by which all of creation is evaluated and respected and treated. This incredible story—the story of our origin and that of all creation—certainly tells us that. But modern humanity has come to see itself as the reference point. It has become the self-absorbed dominant force, the presumed interests and needs of which should dominate the concerns and health, indeed the life of the created world including our home Earth. What has developed is an aggressive seemingly un-conscious attitude that has caused and permitted humans to abuse, to destroy, and to alter the life-giving natural processes which through the billions of years of evolution Earth has developed to express itself. And this devastation has happened so quickly. How quickly? If we look at the entire process as occurring in one year, and the original creation moment as January 1st, humanity's role in it would be a split-second in the last minute of December 31st.

Our calling now is to re-establish a loving relationship with the rest of creation. We are related to all life within creation, all having the same origin—the same source that we as Christians call The Christ that was present at the beginning, at that moment almost 14 billion years ago, the first incarnation, of kenosis, God’s self-emptying into creation. The cosmic Christ in all things. Where do we see it? Everywhere! Jesus puts it well in the gospel of Thomas: “Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.” Animals of all types—those on and beneath the ground, in the sky, and in the water—the plants, the trees, and the living Earth are all our relatives. We are made of the same elements, share almost exactly the same DNA. There is one life, one breath that we all breath. Everything is interconnected and interdependent. We are part of one living system, a unified whole. Barbara Brown Taylor calls it “The Luminous Web,” and God is in all of it. We must live in harmony with the rest of creation. This means that we reject attitudes and beliefs that place us above the natural world. This belief forms the foundational understanding that weaves through all of our other values—that the universe itself is the reference point, not us.

What is needed is a new spiritual, even mystical, communion with Earth, a sensitivity to Earth’s needs, a spirituality born of our source the Creator, in Thomas Berry’s words “a spirituality that emerges out of a reality deeper than ourselves; a spirituality that is as deep as the Earth process itself, a spirituality that is born out of the solar system and of the heavens beyond.” As we see in the creation story above, “out of these elements the solar system and Earth took shape, and out of Earth, ourselves.” Perhaps this understanding of our unity with every created thing can lead us back to once again becoming an integral part of rather than separate from and somehow “above” the rest of creation, and to a renewed sense of responsibility for and our active role in its care, its healing, its return to life. That is our hope today Earth Day.

1 The First Three Minutes, Steven Weinberg

2 The Sacred Universe, Thomas Berry