

Mayflower Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 20, 2023
Rev. Howard Bell
Sermon: *Creation and Creativity*
Scripture: Psalm 104: 24-30

In Sarah's Sunday, April 30th sermon a key message from Sarah was that Psalm 104 presents us with a third creation story. As distinct from the two creation stories found in the Book of Genesis this creation story is not anthropomorphic. Sarah suggested that Psalm 104 awakened her to the challenge of thinking that maybe humans are not the center of the universe. (Do you remember that sermon?) She also suggested that, for most of us, our worldview is fundamentally shaped by the modern so-called enlightened understanding that the earth belongs to us, to humans. She challenged us to work hard to shed this worldview, or maybe she meant shred it.

Sarah's sermon that Sunday had a profound impact on me. Sarah challenged those with ears to hear to "wake up". Today I will share some ways in which I was awakened by hearing her message that day. I was particularly awakened by Sarah's suggestion that those of us with European ancestry were once an indigenous culture with a more integrated, reciprocal, relational feeling with the land and the plants and the animals. I treasure the possibility of recovering that kind of connection with creation.

I titled this sermon: "Creation and Creativity". What thoughts come into your mind when I say the word, "Creativity"? Do you consider yourself to be a creative person? Creativity is generally defined as it relates to artistic ability. Since I did not consider myself artistic, for much of my life -nor do I now - I did not consider myself to be a creative person, nor do. (Just ask my partners in the game of "Pictionary" – when I am chosen last.) However, I have learned to recognize a different definition. Wikipedia defines it as "a process that forms something new and valuable." Now, I easily consider myself to be a creative person.

I invite all of us to tap into our own creativity using this definition as we seek to live into a new relationship with creation; as we seek to shed our mechanistic worldview, and as we seek to live more relationally with nature. I also want to highlight the artistic creativity that was involved in the symbols I have chosen to give shape to my sermon today as part of our summer preaching series. The symbols I have chosen are the "Seasons of Life" banners that hang here on the wall behind me in the front of our sanctuary; as well as the "Earth Banner" that was added this year to hang in the front of our altar table.

The Seasons of Life banners were designed and created by our Sanctuary Group which included Barbara Behnke, Ginger Bush, Suzanne Holt, and Debbie Spuit. This faith community is blessed by the creativity and skill of this dedicated group of talented women. The process for the creation of these four banners began with a request to develop unique banners for an Earth Day Celebration several years ago. Initial sketches were drawn by Debbie Spuit. The Sanctuary Group

met multiple times to consider and adapt the sketches; to select fabrics; and to plan the production of the banners expertly crafted by Barbara Behnke and Suzanne Holt.

Debbie adapted a previous newsletter article written by Ginger Bush to provide me with a more detailed understanding of these banners. Debbie wrote: *“During the development of the idea, we were thinking of the many world cultures that have symbols and rhythms that connect us to the earth; symbols including the elements of air, fire, earth, and water. The banners are meant to remind us of the generosity of the earth and our connection to the world. Wind and water flow through all four panels connecting them together.”*

Debbie continues: *“I was influenced by my interest in Chinese Landscape painting – similar to scrolls of seasons. Ch’i (spirit which flows through) is a core element that was incorporated into the design as well as “The Tao” which manifests itself as an eternal flux of being and becoming, when the seasons come and go all things die and are reborn.”* Debbie further shared, *“The book Water, Wind, Earth and Fire¹ by Christine Paintner was very influential to me. It is a beautiful little book that reminds us that our connection to earth is and can be a meditation.”* Thank you to the creative abilities of these four women who have made these banners available to all of us each Sunday for meditation. These banners also remind us that as a community of faith, we are called to be earth-loving and earth-wise.

The earth banner that hangs here on the front of our altar table was designed and produced by Barbara Behnke. Barbara shared with me that she had a “vision” that the Seasons of Life banners ended at the surface of the earth and did not image any aspect of God’s creation below the surface of the ground. Her vision, which she brought to life in this banner, was to extend the image of the four banners above ground into the earth. One significant aspect to this banner is the flow of water from upon the earth flowing into the earth, and another is the extension of the roots of the tree into the earth. This below earth image shows the layers soil and rock including the red layer that Barbara told me represents iron ore. The banner displays the flow of water not only into the earth, but also through the earth and back out of the earth providing essential nutrients to the trees, grass, and plants that draw the water from the earth.

I think, a bit playfully, Barbara, added a ground mole digging its tunnel to show creatures living within the earth. The first time I noticed the mole, it was just after the melting winter snow had revealed multiple tunnels having been dug by moles in the ground in my back yard. Barbara’s image helped me to be less irritated by this disruption of dirt being thrown upon my grass, and more attuned to the natural process revealing itself to me. I find it rather timely, also, that we are talking about this earth banner on this Sunday, particularly, when it is the week that the rain garden is being planted. What a creative and powerful stewardship of our creation is being done through Mayflower’s “Groundwise Ministry Team.”

When I heard Sarah share her stories of going up north for the month of August and her river walks, my first thought was that I did not have a similar deep connection to nature. However,

¹ <https://www.amazon.com/Water-Wind-Earth-Fire-Christian/dp/1933495227>

upon reflection, I was awakened to remember that during the early years of my first marriage, I developed a deep fondness for and connection to the Atlantic Ocean through week-long vacations to the Jersey Shore. During these visits, my father-in-law taught me to learn about, understand, and respect, the power of the tides. He had spent years as a lifeguard learning that the ocean did not belong to humankind, but humankind belonged to the ocean.

Our days were determined by the tides. When the tide was high, we could wade a short distance out into the ocean and frolic among the waves. At low tide, we loved searching for seashells that had been washed up on the beach as well as an occasional sea creature. Also, at high tide we often chose to go to the back bay for floating on innertubes. I was amazed to realize that the back bay was completely dry during low tide. Learning about how the tides were caused by the moon's gravitational pull, awakened me to the reality of the earth being a part of the larger created universe. My father-in-law helped me follow the time schedule of the tides and taught me to respect the power and influence of the tides, but I also experienced the tides in my body. Though more than 50 years ago, the feeling of being at one with nature – at one with the incoming and outgoing tides - remains with me today.

For the Bible story to accompany today's chosen symbols, I selected seven verses of Psalm 104. I encourage you to read all of Psalm 104 again, but these verses helped shape some of my reflections. Verse 24 reads: *"What variety you have created! ...The earth is filled with your creativity!"* Verses 25 and 26 read: *"There's the vast expanse of the Sea, teeming with countless creatures...and...Leviathan whom you made to frolic there"*. Commentator J. Clinton McCann, says: *"Not surprising, given the mention of the sea, is the appearance of Leviathan, the mythic sea monster that often symbolizes the threat of chaos. But here, Leviathan's image has been altered. Leviathan is no threat at all; he just plays in the water."*² I love the image of a playful God frolicking with Leviathan in the sea. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity that researching this sermon has given me today to personally deepen my spiritual awareness of God's Creation. I hope that what has been shared has also awakened you to your own creativity and to your connections to God's creation.

In closing, I do want to briefly address the question all summer preachers were asked to address: *"What do our symbols, including our name, say about who we are and who we want to become as we enter our next 100 years as a congregation?"* I pray that you take away from today that no matter what name we may call ourselves in the future, that we continue to be an earth-loving people; that we continue to be a justice-seeking people; and that we continue to be a covenant-people seeking to protect God's creation far beyond our next 100 years! For me, I believe proclaiming and following our mission is far more important than what we call ourselves. I also pray that as we consider the name "Mayflower" that we tap into our creativity to both realistically assess what message the name conveys in the past and today. Also, as we creatively assess our name for the future maybe we can tap into God's creativity and to God's playfulness. May it be so. Amen.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/day-of-pentecost-2/commentary-on-psalm-10424-34-35b-10>