

# Stories for life on earth

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 9 September 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Creation 2B – Humanity Sunday

“Keeping Quiet” by Pablo Neruda; Genesis 1.26-28; Mark 10.42-45

Contemporary Reading: "Labels" a poem by Rev Dr Jason John (Uniting Earth Ministry) <https://youtu.be/2LzYfE54suM?list=PL8BcbEAsLWOqWcno7dxcZci7jk29Nyrsm>

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

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Today is the second Sunday in the liturgical season of creation: Humanity Sunday.

The Season of Creation invites us to an eco-spirituality of falling in love with planet earth and for this love and wonder for earth to become the foundation of a Christian response to the ecological crisis.

What stories shall we tell about the relationship of human beings to planet earth?

The story that scientists are telling is a different story to the Biblical story. They are telling us the story of the Anthropocene. Anthropocene literally means the age of humanity. The earth was created millennia ago by physical forces in nature. In our time humans are not merely living on the earth. Humanity has become a force that is reshaping the geological, biological and atmospheric dynamics of earth.

Our religious stories tell us of God’s creation of earth. Science tells us that we have become the gods.

Our ancestors in faith told stories of people and earth, of the dance of divinity and the cosmos. Two of those stories are recorded in the book of Genesis – the book of beginnings.

Today, we heard an excerpt from one of those stories, telling of the creation of humanity and the relation of humanity to the earth. The other, older story, is the Garden of Eden saga in Genesis chapter two.

Within the first story are the seeds of our fraught, destructive relationship with Earth.

*God blessed humanity and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the Earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon Earth.*

The controversy about this text has intensified in recent years as we have become more aware of our intimate relationship with Earth and with all life on Earth.

The creation of humans in the Genesis 1 story comes at the end of the six days of God's creating.

We are told that human beings, regardless of gender, are made in '*the image of God*'. Over the centuries, the image of God has been interpreted in multiple ways. It has been identified as a feature that distinguishes human beings from other creatures, for example, our reason, a higher level of consciousness, the capacity for religiosity, a sense of our intrinsic worth.

According to the text, human beings are to multiply so that they can 'rule', or 'have dominion over' the other creatures and 'subdue' the Earth. It almost seems that humans express the image of God when they exercise their role as rulers over Earth.

This reading of the text did not present problems for people in the past. They were happy to see themselves as representing God and dominating creation.

More recently interpreters with an environmental consciousness, have re-read the text and said that 'have dominion' really means 'be stewards who take care of creation,' and that 'subdue' means something like bringing order out of chaos.

This may be an appealing interpretation, but it is not true to the Hebrew. Other uses of these words in military stories suggest that they are very strong and aggressive: implying forced submission and conquering.

The Genesis 2 story has more promise in its call for humans to till the earth. The Hebrew word for 'till' normally means 'serve'. The role of the first human then—and presumably all humans—is to 'serve' and 'pre-serve' Earth.

This is a story that is better for the earth, but as the drama of Adam and Eve develops it becomes quite bad news for women, and for the relationship of humanity and the divine, and so not a totally helpful story either.

We have two stories which seem to present diametrically opposed positions about our role as humans in relationship to Earth. The first says 'dominate' and the second says 'serve'. Both of them contain some bad news for people and planet.

The compilers of the lectionary (the readings that we read each Sunday) for the Season of Creation have provided us with some interpretive guidance by placing the reading from Mark's gospel alongside the Genesis story. Here Jesus explicitly compares the way of Gentile rulers with the way of the Jesus community and his friends. Roman rulers are tyrants who dominate their people (Mark 10.42).

Among Jesus' disciples, however, 'ruling' and 'dominating' are not acceptable. Instead, Jesus' disciples are to become servants who are willing to serve others (10.43-44). As the Human One, Jesus came not to be served, but to serve; to live fully for others, not to dominate or coerce (10.45).

The message of the Gospel, reflected in Jesus' words, guides us and invites us to mutuality and justice, to be a friend of Earth as a disciple of the way of Jesus.

Jesus wasn't a biblical conservative. But he wasn't a biblical liberal, either. He expected something important from the Scriptures; he expected to be challenged and surprised by God. And he also expected that when you are challenged and surprised by God, some of the details enshrined in the sacred texts will be revealed for what they are: concessions to human hardness of heart and domination—and because they are these things, we can let them go.

But deciding what to discard is a scary question for many people. I think that when the Bible seems to confirm hardness of heart, we can reject it just the way Jesus did. But when the Bible breaks open our world and makes it bigger and more loving, it is achieving its true goal – and we can embrace it.

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The ancient stories illuminate our path on earth, but we must also explore new stories, and now we need to pay attention to the story of the Anthropocene.

In recent years we have heard much about the negative effects of human activity on earth. We need to take these seriously, and to allow this knowledge, especially about the impact of human activity on climate, to disturb and challenge us, but not to paralyse us.

This week I found a website called “*Good Anthropocenes*.” The project’s founders aim to counterbalance the current dystopic visions of the future, which they believe may be inhibiting our ability to move towards a positive future for the Earth and humanity.

So, they are gathering good earth stories which they call “*Seeds of Good Anthropocenes*” – positive visions of futures that are socially and ecologically desirable, just, and sustainable.

They expect that any “Good Anthropocene” that emerges in the future will be radically different from the world as people know it today. Yet they also believe that these futures will be composed of many elements already in existence, which they call “seeds”, which could combine in unique and surprising ways to create a future that is, at present, almost unimaginable.

Our service today opened with reference to four seeds of good Anthropocene:

1. In Medellin, in Colombia, the installation of aerial cable cars allowed poor people who lived in rugged hilltop areas of the city to connect to the public transport system. It connected rich and poor neighbourhoods and dramatically reduced crime as well as reducing carbon emissions.
2. Despite the failure of the Australian federal government to address climate change, thirteen of Melbourne’s largest institutions (including the city government, the University and corporations) have signed an agreement to purchase their energy from new large-scale renewable energy projects, ensuring a long-term market for renewables that encourages their development.
3. Predator Free New Zealand 2050 is a government plan to eliminate all invasive vertebrate predators, including rats, (your) brushtail possums, and stoats, to protect New Zealand’s rare endemic species. New Zealand has the highest rate of threatened species in the world. Scientists are working to develop new

predator control technologies, to connect with Māori goals for environmental management and restoration; and casting a new vision of the relationship between people and nature for urban and rural citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand nature.

4. I found the final good seed that I showed, not on the website, but in my own neighbourhood. The Central Park One project is more than a vertical garden. It employs sustainable methods of water management through storm and rainwater harvesting and grey water recycling, which meet the non-drinking water requirements of the apartment community, including the glorious hydroponic gardens which add so much beauty to our urban landscape.

The other good earth story for today is Jason John's video poem 'labels...' Jason invites us to dream, to hope for and to enact, a good Anthropocene. In the face of denial on the one hand, and dystopian predictions on the other, we can articulate a faith-based, hope-based, response to life on earth, a way of living compassionately in accord with social and ecological justice.

As Jason reminded us, amazing transformations that were at one time impossible dreams have come to reality. Hope for the future, faith in the future, are core to our living in the season of creation

This season of creation, may we fall in love with planet earth, and enact seeds of the good Anthropocene, every day of our lives.