

Faith Seeking a New Heaven and a New Earth

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

September 10, 2023

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So, God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.¹

The Genesis Creation story.

This image is a depiction of the ancient Hebrew understanding of the Universe – with the earth, Sheol below, pillars, and firmament above.

The ancient children of God were captivated by the mystery of the *cosmos* around them.

That wonder and respect for the earth prevailed for millennia, but centuries later, human curiosity and ingenuity motivated the desire to dig deeper, to dissect, to analyze the earth.

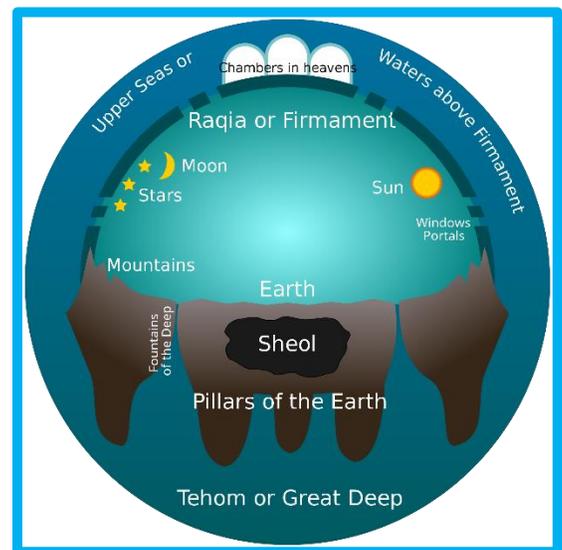
Before, Earth was seen as living and whole, but then in the 16th and 17th centuries, a Scientific Revolution brought with it a more mechanistic understanding of Earth.

One of the most influential books in my theological education was "The Death of Nature" by Carolyn Merchant. It's main thesis:

[T]he Scientific Revolution... [was] a time where an organic understanding of the universe ("cosmos") with a living earth "gave way to a mechanistic understanding in which nature was reconstructed as dead and passive, to be dominated and controlled by humans. [p xvi ...]²

Science has brought with it magnificent discoveries that have improved our quality of life for humans, but Merchant reminds us in this Season of Creation, science also ushered in new practices and understandings of the earth that have caused harm.

In my childhood, I received an amazing gift, a microscope. I have always loved science, and particularly nature. I was no environmentalist, though. I killed whatever poor insect I might find, or plucked a leaf, or hair follicle from my annoyed younger brother's head, and raced over to my microscope with the specimens. Everything



Credit: wikimedia.com

¹ Genesis chapter 1, verses 6 & 7. NRSVUE

² *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, p. xvi. © 1980 Carolyn Merchant. Harper & Row.

was fair game. Cut up, treated with dye from my science set, probed under the microscope.

That was the attitude that prevailed in the Scientific Revolution. Unharnessed zeal to study the natural world. Ethics - those of science, and that aspiring scientist, David - would eventually evolve.

Thankfully, science and ethics have come a long way in our modern time.

Yet I have you noticed in the news recently a battle within science, the whole debate about cloning – but bio-ethics is not keeping up with scientific and technological discoveries. For example, just because we can clone a woolly Mammoth, does that mean that we should?³ Is it ethical? Wisdom Stories of the various world religions are often imbued with a sense of deep respect, often expressed as fear of, or in awe of, the natural world.

Science seeks to demystify the universe. That is important, to dig to find facts, but, the danger (as young David LeGrand illustrated) is that understanding nature as holistic and living becomes replaced by mechanistic models: land and water, heavens, all a collection of parts rather than as an integral, and organic whole.

Spirituality and Religious stories must seem rather unsophisticated at times to a modern scientific sensibility. After all, they are “Stories”, sometimes referred to as myths. But consider the imagery of Psalm 139 clearly celebrating that nothing in Creation, no human creature, can escape the gaze and care of the Creator.

Humanity has not acted as if the earth and its creatures were sacred to God over the past couple of centuries. Perhaps simplistic, unscientific, but Faith Stories still today call us back from the precipice of irreversible damage to the earth. But we do have the blessing of scientific voices who draw Science and the Folk Wisdom of different cultures, calling us to live more gently on Mother Earth – David Suzuki and Jane Goodall, to name a couple.

We could have cherry picked a different Gospel reading that easily matched today’s theme of land, but Season of Creation offered us today’s Matthew reading that had us scratching our heads. We are nothing if not open to a challenge, so we used this Gospel of Matthew. What I hear in today’s very brief passage, is Jesus responding to Ancient authorities, scholars looking for tangible proofs. They want Jesus to prove what only faith understands – Prove that you are who you say you are!

Jesus responds by alluding to the outlandish story of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible. Jonah whom God directed to go to Ninevah to bring a very unsavory message. Jonah resisted, and ended up swallowed up by a whale for 3 days before being spit out. That journey into the depths of the whale, Jesus says, foreshadows what he will soon endure – death, entering the depths of the earth for 3 days, then rising again.

Science, or a legalistic authority, does not always receive that response well – Have Faith.

³ One article that lays out the arguments on both sides of the debate around re-incarnating the woolly mammoth on National Public Radio, found at <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/14/1036884561/dna-resurrection-jurassic-park-woolly-mammoth>. (September 15, 2021, by Scott Neuman)

Too many times I hear people put the Hebrew and Christian Bibles in conflict with science. Science and Religion, one or the other. I know that there are more than a few of you worshipping today who studied sciences, adhere to scientific principles, yet still hold the sacredness of Biblical stories. The Genesis Creation story – Yahweh creating Heavens and Earth – and declaring that it is good. Jesus, executed by authorities of his time, yet rising on the third day. Many of us don't hold these to be factually, or literally, true, but it is a *truth*, nonetheless. After all, Death and Resurrection is a cycle woven into our rhythms of life. The Earth, Creation, the marvels of the galaxy twinkling on a clear night. We know that deaths and resurrections are happening around us all the time.

Faith and Science can converse with one another. Seeing our human existence, and our frailty, from very different perspectives. Seeing our Earth not as an object, and specimen, but as the miraculous ecosystem that sustains us – but only barely as humanity tends to jeopardize that fragile balance. This coming week, may we allow faith to infuse our scientific understandings of the Earth and its creatures. Amen.