

Our UCC Faith: Created in the Image of God
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
September 10, 2017

Genesis 1:1-2:4, John 1:1-5

We have come to the final installment of our summer preaching series on the theological bits within the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith, this week it's: *You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.*

Now, three months ago when I decided to structure our summer this way, I was delighted to figure out that this final statement on creation would also coincide with the first reading in the narrative lectionary from Genesis and the Gospel of John, due to start today. I love tying things up in tidy little packages!

What I didn't plan on was the possibility of reading these praise-filled words about creation as our world became engulfed in one natural tragedy after another. Because that's what it has felt like this week!

So many of our friends and loved ones have suffered from hurricane Harvey in Texas, and a week later other friends and family in Florida and Cuba are dealing with Hurricanes Irma and Jose. Truly, it feels like the "Storm of the Century" bears down on us every seven years or so, often affecting those living in poorer areas the most.

Add to that the devastation of a major earthquake in southern Mexico, which, according to our friends in Oaxaca, didn't directly affect the children at the orphanage of Casa Hogar (thank God). Time will tell how that tender part of the world recovers.

The wreckage that natural disasters leave in their wake never fails to stun me. Last summer my daughter and I had the opportunity to visit the Katrina National Memorial Museum in New Orleans. The exhibit, entitled "*Katrina and Beyond*" tells the story of real people caught in the 2005 hurricane's wrath. It documents their rescue, recovery, rebuilding efforts and the renewal of the city and surrounding areas which is STILL underway 12 years later.

I remember walking through the exhibit, feeling my heart break with every first-person account of the events. Most interesting for me was the interactive map with the minute-by-minute demonstration of which levees broke when and how they combined to flood the area. I hadn't ever fully grasped just how many things had to go wrong for this disaster to occur.

There is something about us as human beings that when we witness such grim images and hear the survivor's stories we feel a bit of the pain that others suffer. Some of us are sensitive enough to feel it to the point of almost being overwhelmed ourselves.

Maybe that's what it means to be created in the image of God.

"God saw it was good". This creation hymn we heard Vaughan read today is about beginnings, not endings. Perhaps it is easier to truly understand the Genesis creation poem if we were to hear it from the lips of those who wrote it. It was the sixth century B.C.E. and the Hebrews were not in good shape. Foreign invaders from Babylon came and conquered the people. Many were taken away from their homeland and forced to live in Babylon (in what is today modern Iraq).

If you were taken away from your homeland and were told that your people are weak and even your God is weak, how would you feel? Pretty rotten, I'd guess. The Babylonians acted like any other invader would in telling their new conquest that they were in charge. The God of Israel was dead. Long live the Babylonian gods.

It was in this three generations time span of despair that this story was written. The author's main goal was not to answer any scientific questions, only the deeply spiritual ones. Their task was to remind the people of Israel that the God they worshipped created the world and was the Lord of all life—even Lord over the mighty Babylonians.

It was supposed to serve as a message of hope. Even though it may feel to them like God had abandoned them, this Creator who gave birth to the mountains and the seas, was truly in control.

When you are a people in exile; you have two choices: To let your God go or to let your God GROW, rethinking who God is in a strange and foreign land. The Hebrew people had to rethink what they believed now that God's indestructible house, the Temple in Jerusalem, had been destroyed.

This creation story was never meant to be an explanation for the process of how all of this came to be. Rather, it was a story written to remind the people who to place their trust in. It was meant to ask the faithful remnant an important question: *Do you still believe your God is powerful enough to protect you?*

Moments of natural disaster raise similar profound and heart-wrenching questions: How could this have happened? Why didn't God do anything? Where is God amid such pain and suffering?

I think it's important that we be honest about these questions and the range of emotions they convey. Doubt and anger are both understandable responses. Denying such emotions – or, worse, quashing them by calling them unfaithful – is neither fair to ourselves or the biblical witness.

Lament is a significant category in Scripture and there is nothing wrong with adding our tears to the catalogue already contained in there.

But in addition to being honest about our emotional reactions to the events playing out before us in Texas, Florida, Cuba and Mexico, it's also important to be honest. We will not be able to answer many of the questions we voice. On such matters, we see through a mirror dimly and are best admitting our limitations by saying that we do not have all the answers. Perhaps we can find it within us as a people to support and listen to those in the scientific community who are working on these environmental issues.

Of course, there are additional things we can do here and now:

First, we can refuse to look for God behind the tragedy – causing mayhem and havoc out of a perverse desire to punish – and instead seek God's presence amidst the tragedy. Already some prominent Christians have tried to stem the unsettling tide of questions by attributing these disasters to God's desire to warn, test, or punish. Such attempts, quite frankly, are unhelpful at best and often do great damage.

Most importantly, such attempts to see the hand of God causing human suffering do not tell the truth about the God we know in Jesus Christ. One of the most repeated affirmations of Scripture is that God suffers with us and for us. God is present: not causing chaos but entering into it, not sending calamity but suffering through it, not standing over us but holding tightly onto us and promising never to let go. Wherever there is tragedy and pain, the incarnate God is there.

Second, we can remember that God does not only suffer with us, but also works through us. Paul's assertion was that we are the body of Christ. To say that we who are broken and limited are the ones whom God sanctifies, commissions, and sends out into the world to be Christ's healing and helping presence is empowering, indeed.

Even in the face of a calamity this immense, we are not helpless. Today, tomorrow and in the weeks and months to come, we can assist in multiple ways with the restoration and rebuilding of affected communities. We can donate to the **United Church of Christ's Disaster Relief Fund, where 100% of our gifts are utilized to help ease the suffering. We can collect items for Church World Service's Disaster Relief Buckets** like our Vacation Bible School children did earlier this summer. We can, as the time becomes right, travel to assist directly with the ongoing relief efforts. We can, as the needs become clarified and infrastructure is freed up, participate in clothing or food drives. *We are the body of Christ and agents of God's redemptive and restoring love in the world.*

Finally, we can pray without ceasing for the people who are suffering, for the governments and relief agencies that are struggling to help them, for all those throughout the world who will offer their support in the days and weeks and months to come. Never underestimate the power of prayer, *for the God we know is always on the side of the afflicted.*

May God's presence be with those who suffering, providing them some measure of comfort, hope, and courage in these days. Amen.