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For What Purpose?

Many Texts

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When I preached my first sermon for a pulpit committee from Ohio almost 23 years ago, I was in my final semester of seminary. Since I knew a lot of things, I decided to take on a big subject. I titled the sermon, "Why Do We Exist?" I don't remember what I said in the sermon, only that Psalm 8 was the foundation for it, but I do remember one comment from a member of the church at which I preached the sermon: "Wow!" he said, "if you can give me the answer to that question, I wouldn't need to hear another sermon for the rest of my life!"

I was a lot smarter then than I am now, so I don't usually attempt sermons like that anymore, but today, I want to give it another try, looking at just a tiny bit of that questions, and this time, I hope, with a bit more humility knowing what one sermon can and cannot do!

The inspiration and motivation for me doing so is two-fold. The first is the amazing experience I had two weeks ago, five days of education at Genesis Farm in northwestern New Jersey where we explored the new cosmology. This, as you may remember, was to be the major theme of my sabbatical and so, I have done extensive reading and personal reflection on this for the past few years. And by cosmology, I mean a total world view, how a people and culture understand how life came to be and what place and role we humans have in life. This includes not only what scientists are telling us how this incredible Universe came to be and its deep powers, but, based on this science, what would or should be the way we understand life? How do we see things? How do we live in light of this perspective? And what is the human place and purpose in this emerging Universe? The five days were extremely intense for me – intellectually, emotionally, and especially spiritually – and my continuing reflections keep slowly turning my cosmology upside down.

The second motivation is the current context, the state of the planet; that context is that Earth is withering. 20,000 species of life are going extinct every year. Since the end of World War II, 60% of Earth's forests have been clear cut. Many parts of the oceans have been basically strip-mined of fish and other aquatic life. 70,000 synthetic chemicals have been released into life in the last 60 years entering the air, soil, water, animals, plants, our food, our bodies. And I could go on and on and on. Many

biologists say that the Cenozoic era, the era of Earth history begun some 65 million years ago with the great dinosaur die-off, is over. Biologists say we are entering an age no one has ever experienced, and no one really knows what to expect or what language to use to describe it because we emerged during the Cenozoic era.

And so, the issue of what is our purpose in life, why do we exist in this time, is absolutely essential. In fact, there's nothing more important for the human race in general to do and we people of faith in particular, than to understand what it means to be human in a way that will help us meet the challenges we face and bring forth the imagination and vision we will need for the future.

Of course, this is not the first time we humans have had to re-think and understand ourselves differently in relation with the rest of life, and then, act upon the new vision of our species. The first humans, hunters and gatherers, knew intimately that they were a part of something vast and amazing, but anthropologists and others tell us that they defined themselves based on their particular place, where together they met and ate and raised children and carried on rituals. They understood themselves primarily as part of their tribal groups. In classical civilizations, the communities were larger, had more complex technologies and were somewhat more diverse and so the human was defined and identified particularly through the various languages, races and religions. We still do this but in the modern world, we have added both the nation state – the United States, in our case – and what we do – our occupation – along with other affiliations – I am a human being, a Christian, father, husband, pastor, a consumer.

All of these are important and there is great wisdom in these identifications that we need today. But it's not enough; the wisdom is too small. Today, we need the wisdom to begin answering this question: Would God be spending about 14 billion years creating the Universe and 4 billion years, Earth, and about a million years creating us to this point, for us to be . . . consumers? Why are we here? For what purpose? The wisdom of a South American Indian people can help us: "To become human you must make room for the immensities of the universe."

Don't you think this is what the storytellers of Genesis were trying to get at when they pictured God fashioning the human being – the adam - out of the dirt, the soil – the adamah - breathing into this Earth-creature the breath of life? From this same planet, this same substance of life, we emerged, just as did all the rest of life on Earth. And so, who we are is not a small subset, but the whole, the planet, Earth, apart from which we do not exist.

You probably know all that, but I don't think anyone can overstate how important this is for us to take in, to sink into our skin and bones and soul. It is a physical/biological fact and it is a deep spiritual truth. Human beings – you and me – like all creatures, are derivative; Earth is primary. We are part of life – not outside of it, not somehow set down on this planet from the outside; part of Earth. We cannot exist – ever! – apart from her life-giving processes. In fact, as Thomas Berry writes, "the Universe is the enduring reality and the enduring value when it come to created existence, even as it finds expression through" millions and millions of life forms.

Isn't this what the Psalmist contemplated in Psalm 8?

“O Lord, our Lord!
How majestic is your name
in all the Earth!
You have set your glory
above the heavens.

.....
When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars
which you have established;
what are human beings that you
are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
And yet

(Psalm 8)

There's always an “And yet,” for the poets and prophets, for here, in this song, we see one of our primary human purposes: with the emergence of human beings, God, has brought forth a self-conscious creature and through the powers of the Universe, has created a being to reflect upon, radiate and celebrate the beauty, magnificence and awesomeness of life. Or, put it this way: we are created to praise God! Think of that! How's that for purpose!

We can't overstate how important this way of looking at life is because, in truth, the current dominant worldview – or cosmology – is absolutely the opposite of the physical and spiritual reality of life. For the most part, western civilization, as fostered the view that we are primary and everything else is derivative. We are something other than Earth, apart, and therefore, everything is a collection of objects for our use. The anger and revulsion at the discovery of Michael Vick's involvement in dog-fighting is certainly justified. But isn't that an outlook on our place in life that believes we can basically do with whatever is not human anyway we wish? Vick and his cohorts not only crossed a line of use and “ownership” of other life forms, they obliterated it. But where did they get the idea that those dogs were simply objects to use however they chose? I could give you a 300-year litany of examples of this just from the North American experience, but I won't. If you don't believe it's true, pick up a newspaper and go to the daily Earth section and tell me the news of the air or soil, the waters or trees. . . .There is no such thing? Why not? Aren't they part of life? Aren't we humans dependent on these for our own survival? And doesn't the outer world activate our inner, spiritual lives? . . . Or go the Albany Avenue Reservoir sometime and take a walk in the Forest Demonstration area. It is a wonderful place. Now, before you go on the trail, read the sign and on the bottom, in big letters are these words: “FORESTS ARE AMERICA'S RENEWABLE RESOURCE.” Forests are resources, not manifestations of God

who brings forth all life and lives within all life. And so, forests are a collection of resources for our use.

So, another role of ours is what the Psalmist sings: to enhance Earth's processes that she would continue to be the amazing, life-giving creation of God's that she's been for 4 billion years. Isn't now the time to recognize that our living is not to be using up or degrading life – as if we are going to be able to create something that will sustain us when it's all gone or so toxic that even government regulators wouldn't say it's OK to eat or drink or breathe? Isn't our role and purpose as humans to be encouragers of Earth, including the human race, to become something more wonderful than we can even imagine?

I know that this Psalm is often interpreted to mean that we humans are on top

“You have given them dominion
over the works of your hands”

and that we are designed to control everything

“You have put all things under
their feet.”

And so, we've rationalized for hundreds of years: “It's in the Bible. It says we're supposed to rule everything! We're in control!” But perhaps in our time we need to look at this Psalm and all of scripture, for that matter, through another lens and recognize that what this Singer is telling us doesn't have anything to do with ruling over everything or control. We are here to become integral with the larger community of life and to enhance life – all of it, human and other than human.

It is the greatest of any illusion ever conceived (should I say the greatest of all LIES?) to believe that human well being can be advanced while all the rest of life is diminished. It can't happen and it won't happen. And if you think we will have a rich inner spiritual life, a closer relationship with God while Earth's life systems are degrading, you had better think again. From where does poetry arise? What inspires the prophets and gives rise to our deepest and most profound prayer? How about our music and dance, our visions and dreams, our hopes for compassion and peace? Rachel Carson was right nearly 50 years ago when she said “Man is part of nature and his war against nature is ultimately war against himself.” And I would say that is true both physically and spiritually.

So, who are we and what is our purpose? As a Christian, I resonate with a theologian who once wrote (and I'm paraphrasing) that we are not human beings trying to become Christians. We are Christians trying to become what we've been created to be – human beings.

Look at Jesus. Pilate said so much more than he knew when he shouted to the crowd at the mockery of a trial: “Behold, the man!” Behold, humanity! Behold, everything human beings have been created to be. If you look at Jesus' life and teachings in scripture, and if you allow them to move in you and over you, you'll see that

they are dominated by two things: the first is his conviction that the Creator has made every person a creature of divine worth, and whatever individual or social structure that denies the worth of any human being, is sinful and must be transformed. The second is that God has linked all people into a single web of humanity and so, whatever pits one against the other is sinful and must be transformed.

This morning, I want to say that had Jesus' context been ours, with the withering away and diminishment of Earth and the degradation of human beings everywhere, would he not have said that God the Creator has made every living being a creature of Divine worth and that this same Creator has linked all of life into a single web and so, whatever degrades and abuses life must be transformed? Isn't our current prevailing view of ourselves and life, in need of deep transformation?

This is not easy. In fact, if you really take this seriously, it's mind blowing. But I suppose that's what our faith has always called us to do:

“Do not be conformed to the world,” writes Paul,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds
so that you may discern what is the will of God –
what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

(Romans 12: 2)

Robert Frost wrote “You have to live by shedding.” It's hard to shed the way we understand reality to be and to live in communion with all life, but that is what is needed and what is, I believe, the first step in the great work of our time. It's an enormous task, something no humans in any period of our million year history has ever been called upon to do. But it is our call, our purpose, and we are not alone. We are never alone. We live in the embrace of Earth with the great communion of life. And God is with us, Immanuel, the One who moves within you and through you, around you and for you, to give you and me the courage and the strength to carry on this great work.

Edward Everett Hale made this pledge to the Lend-a-Hand Society and with its reading, I will close.

“I am only one,
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something;
and because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that
I can do.”

May the peace of Christ be with you.