

*Created for Love*

*Genesis 1:1-27; 2:4-8; Luke 10:25-28*

*Whitefish UMC*

*July 11, 2010—VBS Sunday*

- † “How did we come to be” “Why are we here?” Two weeks ago, as our annual Vacation Bible School began, these were the questions that framed our adventure in a Galactic Blast. The children learned the stories, songs, and wonder of God’s creation and their part in it.
- † But these are questions that continue to nag at us adults, too. No longer content to believe what we’ve always been taught, we question, we doubt, and yet we still seek affirmation of God’s wondrous power.
- † Scholars now talk of the period in which we live as “postmodernism.” Sounds eggheadish, doesn’t it? As defined by philosophers in an episode of PBS’s Faith and Reason programming, postmodernism is:
- † “A general and wide-ranging term which is applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and cultural and literary criticism, among others. Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us

individually. Postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal.”

- † Whew. Then how, in the face of this predominate cultural shift, are we to teach our faith to children with integrity and truth? One of the good things about this period in our culture is, paradoxically, more acceptance of story, artistic rendering, and interpretation—as long as they are not presented as moral certainty.
- † With this caveat, and with the events of the last week in our church family in mind, you are invited to consider a perspective on the questions raised in today’s scriptures and at VBS. In our United Methodist hymnal, near the back, is a song by James Weldon Johnson, called “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” I first heard it in seminary in Chicago, where I learned that it inspired the early civil rights movement.
- † James Weldon Johnson lived from 1871 to 1938 and was a pivotal figure in the Harlem Renaissance. An author, scholar, diplomat, poet, teacher—full of energy and intellect and faith—he inspired many with his voice of passion and lyrical praise to the God of creation and new life.
- † Although his hymn is wonderful, his interpretation of today’s scriptures from Genesis, “The Creation,” is even better. It was brought to mind this week in a conversation I had with our children, including our Walter, about life and death and our purpose here on this earth. Take a moment to let these images and words wash over you:
- † PLAY VIDEO PRESENTATION OF “THE CREATION.”
- † “Amen. Amen.” So the poet affirms. But that’s just the beginning, isn’t it? Created to keep God company and to please God, created from and for love—the adventure of humanity began. But from the beginning, in the

garden, humanity, created in freedom and for freedom, didn't always fulfill its purpose as God hoped and intended.

- † Especially when it came to care for creation and for each other, we fell short. We needed constant reminders from God and God's prophets, teachers—and ultimately from God's son, Jesus. When it came right down to it, Jesus summed it up in what is called the Great Commandment that we heard this morning in Luke's Gospel. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength—and love your neighbor as yourself.
- † Seems simple enough, but not in practice, often. The other night, one of our beloved members, helping with preparation for Katy Pearson's funeral, said: "I am reading the most depressing book about the history of humanity's oppression of the earth and its peoples—a lot of it in the name of Christianity. How could some of these oppressed people want to be Christians?"
- † I have to confess—I love these questions, hard as they are. And believe me, I don't have all the answers either. But I return to the work of people like James Weldon Johnson and his faithful praise of God in all God's goodness, despite the oppression experienced by his people.
- † For God works through people who challenge violence and slavery and other social evils. And God works through people when the unthinkable happens for no apparent reason at all—when a young mother who has done so much good for so many falls sick and dies—leaving her family and her community dumb with grief. God works for love and freedom and healing despite all that's grim and demonic in the world. How do I know? Because I see it every day. I see it in our children and I see it in you.
- † This last week I was given the awesome responsibility of talking to the older children about death and life. Of course they were upset over Walter's

mom's death, and they had a lot of questions. They sat, heads in their hands, as they wondered how to help their friend of so many years (in their short lives at least).

† And they asked, “Were you there when Katy died?” “What happens then?” “What do they do with the body?” “Why is it put in the ground?”

† And these are questions of life, and breath, and earth, and love. Questions that bring us back to the creation story—to being made in the image of love.

† In their first day at VBS, the children learned the biblical story of creation. They heard the astronauts quote the Bible on the moon in 1968 on Christmas Eve—the same verses we heard this morning. And they heard a wonderful poem about creation. Part of it goes like this:

...God could have stopped to take a break,  
But God had something more to make:  
I need some friends whom I can send  
To do my work on earth.”

A gentle breath then left God's lips.  
It carved out feet and legs and hips  
And chest and face: the human race  
Was what God brought to life.

God told the humans, “Yes, it's true  
I made this whole world just for you.  
To you I give all things that live,  
All creatures great and small.

I made you in my image, see?

You can create and you are free.  
Now go explore from shore to shore  
This gift I made for you.”

At last creation’s work was done.  
The seventh day had just begun.  
God loved the world, and that love swirled  
Throughout the planet earth.

“It’s time to stop for now,” God said.  
“Although much more work lies ahead,  
This day I’ve blessed as one of rest,  
A Sabbath for us all.”

So all we know and all we see—  
The largest, farthest galaxy,  
The smallest flea, and you and me—  
It all belongs to God.

Let everything that has breath praise  
Our God for those six busy days  
So God can hear our joyful cheer:  
Praise God! Praise God! Praise God!

† As often happens, we learn as much from our children as they do from us. A few minutes after our conversation about life and death, the older Rainbow’s End children and I walked out in the community garden to take a photograph

that a friend had requested. As we walked back toward the church, Walter and his dad Raymond pulled up to come in and talk about questions they had, too.

- † The children stood back for a moment, wondering what to do next. But then, as instructed, they ran toward their friend, stopped, expressed their sympathy, and gave Walter and Raymond a collective hug. Here is a photograph of that moment.
- † This is why we are here. For love, for healing, for strength for whatever comes our way. A little while later, as I left my office for a moment, I heard the children singing VBS songs—dancing, praising God, returning love to the God of love.
- † Can we take a lesson from them? Made in the divine image, we are here to love as God loves. In a beautiful essay at the beginning of The Green Bible, Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of the “dominion of love.” Its concluding paragraph can send us out with praise and intention:
  - † “Wait, wait, wait a minute. How does that work? Well, you know how good it feels under the shadow of God’s wings, right? Perfect. So move over. Make room, because there is a whole creation seeking refuge, and you, you are the spitting image of the One who gives life to all.”
  - † Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Dominion of Love,” in The Green Bible, 2008.

James Weldon Johnson, “The Creation,” youtube rendition by Wintley Phipps

Galactic Blast VBS Resource, Cokesbury, 2010.