

A Circle on the Face of the Deep  
Sunday, May 18, 2008  
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis  
Psalm 8  
Genesis 1:1-5  
Proverbs 8:22-31

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. God created the fish in the waters and the birds in the sky, and all the wild creatures upon the earth. And God saw that it was good. But something was missing.*

*God said, "Let us make humans in Our image, after Our likeness."*

*"Are you speaking to us?" asked the animals.*

*"Yes," said God. "I am speaking to all that I have created." And so the animals gave their advice.*

So begins the story "How did the Animals Help God?" by Nancy Sohn Swartz. The story asks us to imagine what it might have been like to be there when God was creating human beings. Imagine if God asked you for advice about how to create human beings, how would you respond? The animals respond quickly to God's request.

*"Make them brave," said the tiger.*

*"Make them gentle," said the lamb.*

*"Make them loud," said the lion.*

*"Make them quiet," said the clam.*

*"Make them small," said the ant.*

*"Make them large," called the whale.*

*"Make them fast," snapped the cheetah.*

*"Make...them...slow," drawled the snail.*

*One after another the animals shared their ideas of what people should be like.*

*"Let them swim," said the fish.*

*"Let them sing," said the lark.*

*"Make them playful," laughed the dolphin.*

*"With good appetites," gulped the shark.*

*God thanked all of creation for their gifts.*

*Then God said, "Humans will be partners with Me to care for you and for the world. I will give them the gifts of goodness and kindness and love. I will bless them so they can choose between right and wrong. Just as you give to them, they will give to you." In the image of God and in the image of nature, God created us. And God saw that it was very good.<sup>i</sup>*

The relationship between the animals and God is unique in this story. It shows the whole animal kingdom willing and eager to share their ideas with God about how to create the world. It also shows us how God is willing to listen and hear the ideas shared by the animals. If we are tempted to think about God as being too big or too busy or too distant to be in relationship with us, this story makes us think differently. If we are tempted to think of ourselves as too small or too busy or not creative enough to be helpful to God in creating the world, this story makes us think differently.

One of the wonderful things about what the animals offer is that their suggestions all reflect a little bit of themselves. Tigers are known to be brave. Lambs are known to be gentle. Clams are known to be quiet. If we were among the animals God sought advice from, we would need to consider which part of ourselves to call out as that thing which would be a good quality for others to share. As grown-ups and children we do not always think first about what they are good at, in fact, we often think first of the things we are not good at. If we stop and think about it, we might admit we are insightful, courageous, resourceful, compassionate, honest, or funny. We might admit we like to sing or dance or draw pictures, even if we do not even do those things very well. Following the animals in this story challenges us to describe ourselves in one word. Yet if we add all those words together, the qualities of those words make it possible for us as humans to be so much more than just one thing.

One of the wonderful things about what God does in asking the animals' advice is that God encourages us all to consider how we can be partners with God. This invitation from God teaches that creation is something in which we can participate. One of the main things we do in worship is praise God, and one of the most common things that God is praised for, both in the Bible and in modern times, is the creation of the world. The words of Genesis 1 that Austen read this morning are familiar; one of the first stories we learn is what happens "in the beginning." This knowledge translates quickly to praise. Psalm 8 that Eric read is a perfect example of how we praise God for creating the earth. *When I look to the heavens*, the Psalmist says, *the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established*...creating is so physical, it is powerful because we can almost feel God's touch when we read about how God created the world. *The work of your fingers*, the Psalmist asks us to imagine God's hand, fingers outstretched, like Michelangelo's God creating Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, tracing the circle of the moon and the outline of the stars. Do we dare lay our hand over God's and trace a circle?

If we need encouragement to participate in creation, we get it from the book of Proverbs. The section from Proverbs chapter 8 that Isabella read for us today connects wisdom with creation and echoes the beginning of John's Gospel in naming a special relationship in being present with God in the beginning, at the creation of the world.

Wisdom declares *the Lord created me at the beginning of God's work, the first of God's acts of long ago. Ages ago I was setup, at the first, before the beginning of the earth*. Wisdom describes her birth and participation with God in creation clearly. Her birth story recalls a time older than the *in the beginning* of Genesis, but then she describes her early life alongside God. She recalls the work of creation, naming the things that she was present with God in making – shaping the mountains, making the fields, establishing the heavens, making the skies separate, molding the shorelines of the world's beaches, drawing a circle on the face of the deep.

Wisdom is all grown up when she is speaking here in Proverbs, and the relationship she presents of she and God as partners has been of interest to people who study theology, because it describes yet another way of thinking about the kinds of relationships God has. Biblical scholar Gale Yee sees still another image in this passage. She slows time down a little more and asks us to imagine a younger Wisdom at God's feet as a child in the creation story. She describes Wisdom as "a darling child" for whom God "builds a home...protecting and nurturing her growth in this created world."<sup>iii</sup> Seeing the act of creation as a relationship between parent and child playing together gives us a new perspective on creation and our potential involvement in creation.

First, it gives us an image of creation that is fun. Creating the world is a powerful exercise, but we don't talk very often about the power of joy. In Proverbs 8 it is clear that creating the world was a happy time for Wisdom and for God; they planned and built and spent time together. If there was a schedule, it didn't interfere with their happiness. Imagine the creation of the world like that Saturday when you don't have any plans, you can sleep in and go to brunch, or go for a leisurely morning run. You can read "Brown Bear, Brown Bear what do you see?" to your daughter or son as many times as necessary and just listen to the sleeping breath of your napping baby or the running feet of your toddler. The creation described here in Proverbs holds no connection with unhappiness or disobedience; it is pure and simple and playful. It is a description of what we all imagine the world can be, a place of safety, an order created out of chaos that shields and protects us in a beautiful expression of love and freedom, of trust and happiness.

Second, this passage gives us an image of creation that is anchored in the present. Wisdom and God play and create together "day after day" and "continually." It is a relationship that must be maintained, one day is not enough, it is day after day after day that the world is created new. The process of creation is continuous, not a one time event. So when we hear Proverbs 8, it is not just a description of someone else's relationship with God, it is an invitation to be like Wisdom and play with God in the work of creation. It is a call to us to imagine a joyful God who we can play beside. It is a call to imagine what we would offer to the plans, to the building, to being part of the joy of drawing circles over the face of the deep.

Over the course of this year, our children have been playing alongside Wisdom. They have been planning and building and giving their advice about what they think the world should be like. In October, children from *First Kids*, our elementary age fellowship group, investigated things that could be done around the church to save energy and then they presented their suggestions to the session. The children made suggestions about light bulbs and recycling bins and they praised the way things were organized and labeled in the kitchen. At church school Discovery Day in April they talked about ways they could care for the earth, and they shared many of their concerns about pollution, the poor, the importance of recycling and using better types of energy and energy efficient appliances and light bulbs. *Converse First*, our new committee who is helping us as a congregation think about how to be more "green", is in frequent conversation with our children about their ideas. Last week the children gathered together and created these beautiful banners to show the joy and playfulness of creation. These actions are just a few of the ways they have been playing beside wisdom.

If we believe that creation is not just about one moment in time, but rather about some thing that we can co-create with God, we cannot help but be excited. As adults we sometimes lose our belief in the possibilities of creation and the inquiring questions and ideas of children that we find renewed inspiration. Our playfulness about being co-creators is not just a call to tackle environmental issues, although that is a good place to start. There are an endless number of circles that need to be drawn over the face of the deep; like the animals who offered their advice in the story we heard earlier, there are countless ways to be playful and express the joy of being part of creation. Our part in creation will be different for each of us, but we must keep our hand out-stretched, finger pointed, gently tracing circles next to each other. When our fingers touch it will be a reminder to laugh and start over in the beginning, repeating projects that we like and saying to one another about our vision of creation: Make it welcoming! Make it compassionate! Make it loving! Make it peaceful!

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<sup>1</sup> Sohn Swartz, Nancy. [How Did the Animals Help God?](#) (Skylight Paths Publishing: Woodstock, VT, 2004).

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<sup>ii</sup> Yee, Gale A. “The Theology of Creation in Proverbs 8:22-31” in Creation in the Biblical Traditions ed. Richard J. Clifford and John J. Collins. The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 24. (The Catholic Biblical Association: Washington, DC, 1992) p. 93.