

“Day Four: The Great Lights”
Preached at The United Church of Los Alamos
By Rev. Don Childers
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“Blue moon, you saw me standing alone,
Without a dream in my heart,
Without a love of my own,
Blue moon, you knew just what I was there for,
You heard me saying a prayer for,
Someone I could care for.”¹

“Blue Moon” was originally written by Rodgers and Hart in 1934. It was redone by “Louie” Armstrong, Elvis Presley and others.

“By the light of the silvery moon
I want to spoon
To my honey I’ll croon love’s tune
Honey moon, keep on shinin’ in June
Your silvery beams will make love dreams
We’ll be cuddlin’ soon by the silvery moon.”²

This well known song was written in 1909 by Edwards and Madden in a series of “moon” songs of the Tin Pan Alley era. The tune has been used in many television series and was sung by Doris Day in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Songs about the moon, poems about the moon, stories about the moon such as the “man in the moon” or the “moon is made of green cheese” has been an important part of our folklore and popular culture.

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Welcome to “Day Four” of our series on the “Creation Quilts” and the story in Genesis. Our text reads:

¹ “Blue Moon” originally written by Rodgers and Hart in 1934, Lyrics by Lorenz Hart and music by Richard Rodgers. Remade by Louis Armstrong, Elvis Presley and The Marcels.

² Music written by Gus Edwards, Lyrics by Edward Madden the song was published in 1909.

God said, “I command lights to appear in the sky and to separate day from night and to show the time for seasons, special days, and years. I command them to shine on the earth.” God made two powerful lights, the brighter one to rule the day and the other to rule the night. He also made the stars. Then God put these lights in the sky to shine on the earth, to rule the day and night, to separate light from darkness. God looked at what he had done, and it was good. Evening came, and then morning---that was the fourth day.³

It is here in the creation story that we must abandon all resemblance of scientific credibility. How could plants created on Day Three survive without the Sun which was not created until Day Four? Furthermore, it is obvious from this text that the Hebrews believed that the moon was also a “powerful but lesser light”. Indeed for eons people believed that the moon generated its own light and it has only been within the last few centuries that we have learned that the moon only “reflects” the light of the sun.

It was Galileo and his observations of the moon and sun in the 16th and 17th centuries, which truly ran afoul of the Church and shook traditional beliefs about the cosmos. Using the new invention, a telescope, Galileo observed that the planet Jupiter had objects---moons---that were revolving around that huge planet. In his landmark book, *Sidereus Nuncius* published in 1610, Galileo shook the foundations of the Ptolemy/Aristotelian based cosmology.⁴ The discovery of moons around Jupiter and his observations of valleys and mountains on the Earth’s moon gave support to the ideas of Copernicus that the universe was bigger than believed and that the earth revolved around the sun.

³ Genesis 1:14-19, Contemporary English Version.

⁴ Found at <http://web.hao.ucar.edu/public/education/sp/images/galileo.html>.

The next year Galileo made further observations of the phases of Venus and observed sunspots on the Sun that further tipped the balance away from an earth centered universe toward the ideas of Copernicus. The movement of these “spots” across the face of the sun challenged the belief of a static earth and sun. The discovery of valleys and mountains on the moon challenged the idea that the moon was a light generating source like the sun.

Even though in 1616, Galileo turned to observing less controversial things he was still under the watchful eye of the church. In 1633 Galileo was forced to kneel in front of the Roman Inquisition and recant his beliefs in Copernicus’ ideas about the motion of the earth. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and kept in house arrest, with no visitors. It was only when Galileo went blind in 1637 that the sentence was relaxed and he was allowed to receive visitors.⁵ We now know that Galileo was correct and the church was incorrect.

So, how are we to read and understand this ancient text in light of what we know today? Are we to discard our scientific understandings? Are we to discard the text? Or are we to reframe the text into a spiritual understanding that brings us closer to the spirit of God? As we have said Genesis is not about the specific process of creation---it is about its meaning and significance.

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One message from the text that is still current today is that the sun, moon and stars are not to be objects of worship. In the story the fact that God creates the sun, moon, and stars flies in the face of the religious beliefs of many cultures among which the Hebrews lived and interacted with. Those cultures tended to worship the sun, moon

⁵ <http://web.hao.ucar.edu/public/education/sp/images/galileo.html>.

and/or stars and to see these objects as manifestations of gods. The statement of the Hebrews that God created the sun, moon, and stars was as radical in that day and time as the ideas of Galileo were in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Among many people of Europe (and other places) the mighty oak tree was worshipped as the home of the gods of the sky. It was believed that the gods spoke through lightening which literally cracked opened the sky. The oak tree was linked to the gods of the sky and was viewed as sacred.

In 723 C.E., the missionary Boniface traveled to the regions of Germany to bring the gospel to those people. He struggled and struggled against the religious beliefs of the northern Europeans. Finally, one day in the spirit of Elijah Boniface confronted the false “gods” and beliefs of those people. He cut down the sacred oak tree. He did so proclaiming that if the god Thor existed then the god should strike him down for cutting down the sacred tree. When nothing happened to Boniface, it is said that the people began to turn to Christ. Felling the sacred Oak Tree----confronting the false beliefs with “new knowledge”-- is regarded as the beginning point of Christianity to the Germanic peoples.

Ironically it has been the Hebrew idea that creation is not the realm of the gods or ancestors that led to the development of science within the Jewish, Christian and Muslim cultures.

A second point is that creation is to be used and enjoyed by all of us. In the text, the writer sees the sun, moon, and stars as having a purpose and as being there to aid humankind. The sun, moon, and stars mark the time and alert us to the changing seasons. This is still true today. Calendars are based on cycles of the moon. The seasons are based on the shifting of the earth in relation to the sun.

Today with expanding knowledge about the greater and lesser lights we know that the tides, the varied geology of our planet, the seasons, the weather, and even human, plant and animal reactions are tied to the sun, moon, and even the stars. In other words we are knit together into a grand tapestry and we must learn to respect and value one another or the whole suffers.

For centuries the traditional reading of Genesis supported the idea that everything in creation was created for humankind and humankind alone. This idea is being challenged today by many Christians and other religious people who now see we-humans as a part, an important part, but as a part of God's creation---not the center. As spirits made in "God's image" it falls to us to be caretakers and protectors of the small part of creation that is under our watch. Thus, creation is to be enjoyed, used, but also protected and used wisely. In the current discussion about global warming and the environment we are discovering one area where progressive to conservative Christians and Jews find common ground.

Out of this ancient text comes the theology and motivation for being good stewards of this creation. Some of the factors in creation are beyond our control. We do not control when volcanoes erupt, when solar flares occur, or when an asteroid slams into

the earth. We can control how we use resources, how we manage our waste, and we can have some influence on the whole.

I had the wonderful privilege of living for a year in Seattle, Washington. It continues to be a city of great beauty nestled between Lake Washington, Puget Sound, and Mount Rainer. I remember while I was there during 1970 that people began to refer to the Puget Sound as the “Pungent” Sound.

Seattle is not an old city like the cities of Europe or even some of the cities of New Mexico. From the beginning the Puget Sound, so vast, seemed a natural place to dump garbage and other waste as Seattle grew and grew. As early as the 1920s shell fish growers were warning about the effect of the pulp mill pollution that was dumped into the Sound.⁶ By the 1960s the state mandated to pulp mills that they had to treat the waste and toxic byproducts before dumping it into the water systems.

People in Seattle, Washington could not believe that less than seventy years of garbage dumping in the huge body of water known as the Puget Sound could transform it into the “Pungent” Sound. While I lived in Seattle in 1970, the community was becoming aware of what human activity could cause. Seattle, of course had not been a large city for most of its history and so it is natural to understand how people were thinking. Their garbage could be dumped inexpensively into Puget Sound and would be unnoticed. Yet, some 70 years of dumping finally caused the southern part of the Sound to revolt. The beaches became littered with garbage washing up from the Sound. The fishing was threatened. The beauty was threatened.

The crisis began to unfold in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In those year’s shellfish beds were closed, tumors appeared on Puget Sound bottom fish, salmon

⁶ <http://www.theolympian.com/environment/v-print/story/45317.html>.

declined, gray whales began dying and Puget Sound was declared in trouble by the Federal Superfund.⁷

In 1992, according to the newspaper, *Olympian*, the state passed a law requiring local governments to form shellfish protection districts and create clean-up plans for pollution but the law did not require enforcement.

In 2002, oxygen levels plummeted in the lower Hood Canal, triggering large fish kills and deaths of other marine life. In 2005 the Puget Sound orca whale population was listed as “endangered”. Finally in 2005 \$52 million was approved by the state to begin a plan to clean up and restore Puget Sound. In November of 2006 The Puget Sound Partnership, which is a private-public group began work on a project to restore Puget Sound by 2020, if the plan stays on track.⁸

This story is repeated again and again all throughout our world. Modern understandings of Genesis have shifted from the ideas of domination to the ideas of stewardship. The point is that we are linked together, all of us, all of nature, and perhaps we are linked even more than we now know. Living responsibly is something that Moses, the prophets, and Jesus emphasized. What we do has an impact, far beyond what we imagine.

Thus, the sun, moon, stars can serve to remind us of this wonderful universe, of how we are knit together, and of the God that is. Creation reminds calls us to be good stewards of this wonderful world. Amen.

⁷ <http://www.theolympian.com>.

⁸ See also Seattle Post Intelligencer, December 19, 2005, “Gregoire Announces Major Puget Sound clean up plan”.