

Creation and the Effective Word: Holy Storytelling, Creation, and God's Mission

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We all know that words are powerful, in spite of what our mothers tried to teach us: “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” They do hurt, deeply, but they can also heal: “You are my beloved, and in you I am well pleased,” words of courage and strength spoken at Jesus’ baptism and echoed at every one since. Words said often enough can tear down and dishearten as well as build up and help us dream new possibilities.

The Creative Word

The big story we share as children of Abraham is about the power of the divine word, from the beginning of creation and through the ages—unto ages of ages. “In the beginning when . . . the earth was a formless void . . . , the [breath] from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’” (Genesis 1:1–3).¹ God saw its goodness, and separated the darkness from the light—and there was evening and morning, day one. God spoke, named distinctions, and blessed the goodness of all that began to emerge.

The creative word has never been silent for long, and human beings who have shared in giving voice to it have in one way or another echoed Isaiah:

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¹ *Breath* (*ruach*) can also be translated as *wind* or *spirit*.

“I don’t think the way you think.

The way you work isn’t the way I work.”

GOD’S Decree.

“For as the sky soars high above earth,

so the way I work surpasses the way you work,

and the way I think is beyond the way you think.

Just as rain and snow descend from the skies

and don’t go back until they’ve watered the earth,

Doing their work of making things grow and blossom,

producing seed for farmers and food for the hungry,

So will the words that come out of my mouth

not come back empty-handed.

They’ll do the work I sent them to do,

they’ll complete the assignment I gave them. (Isaiah 55:8–11)²

We, and the word spoken into us, are part of the assignment. That does not mean we always understand exactly what is asked of us, yet it does mean that God’s word eventually has its way—in this generation or millennia hence. We do not come to the work empty-handed, and we have companions on the Way to help the discernment and creative re-imagining.

Some of those companions are the prophetic voices inviting us to discover new visions, new stories, new understandings of where the divine creative urge is leading. The word comes in all sorts of packages—expected and surprising, aggressively offensive and in gentle sighs—John the Baptizer and Bob Dylan, Francis of Assisi and Francis of Rome, Sojourner Truth and Sally Bingham. The wisdom of the ages informs the holy voices pushing us to search for greater creativity, true freedom of spirit, and life in its fullness. Those voices include critique of the current state of things and eager hunger for the more. They are echoed by poets, including not only Bob Dylan but Common, George Herbert, Maya Angelou, Leonard Cohen, Rumi, and all who build narratives of meaning that lean and lead toward life that is healed and whole and holy.

That does not mean there are not demonic or destructive stories, ways in which human beings try to build fortresses of exclusion and exploitation—like the myths of Aryan superiority undergirding

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 2002), 1317–1318.

National Socialism and apartheid and not a little of American exceptionalism.³ Some have noted that myths about Britain's empire underlie the politics of Brexit, even to the point of recommissioning a royal yacht⁴—one presumes it will rule the seas of the lower Thames, at least above the flood barriers.

We share a powerfully creative story about a healed world that provides abundance for all God's creatures. It is Isaiah's banquet on the hillside, the new heaven and new earth of Revelation, a garden alive and fruitful for every creature on the planet. It contains the *du-namis* (power) of God's effective word—both the dynamite to subvert and transform what stands in the way and the dynamic spirit to create an as yet unfinished world of peace with justice for all.

We are a long way from that vision, and the distance is increasing and the road getting rockier in tandem with the pollution we are pouring into the atmosphere; the heating of oceans, air, and land; disappearing coasts and islands; and vanishing species across the planet. The hard work of redirecting our collective course begins in the ability to tell the truth we know about the story of both what is and the future we yearn for. There is substantial good news about that truth-telling work in the North American context—not only do a strong majority of Americans finally recognize that climate change is a legitimate hazard (even if they do not all think it is actually happening yet⁵), but we are beginning to forge effective and dynamic partnerships to create a more just future.

The Dynamic Word at Work: Challenge and Potential

Consider the challenges of futuring for the common interest of an entire community. The pioneer cemetery in Reno is adjacent to the University of Nevada's burgeoning campus. That cemetery has not seen a burial since 1959, and in recent decades it has been a frequent site of

³ See, for example, Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2015).

⁴ Steven Erlanger, "Facing 'Brexit,' Lawmakers Ask How to 'Make Britain Great Again,'" *The New York Times*, October 13, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/10/14/world/europe/uk-britain-tories-hard-brexit.html.

⁵ A recent poll reported that 31 percent of Americans believe we have not yet begun to see the effects but will in the future. Lydia Saad and Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Concern About Global Warming at Eight-Year High," *Gallup Polls, Politics*, March 16, 2016, www.gallup.com/poll/190010/concern-global-warming-eight-year-high.aspx.

student parties and desecration. The current owner of the land wants to disinter and move the remains of those buried in the oldest half, with the ultimate goal of using that land for student dormitories. Some in the community are upset at the possibility of moving their ancestors' graves, some want to profit from the development opportunity, some are concerned for students' welfare and access to the campus and hope to reduce traffic congestion in the process. Others are worried about disturbing the remains of a man who died of anthrax in the late 1800s (anthrax spores can be infectious for a very long time). Still others are simply offended by any thought of moving human remains.⁶ This is a community problem. It was not caused by one individual or group, but its solution is going to require persistent conversation and eventual collaboration, for the sake of the whole community. There is no perfect outcome, but there is a way forward, even if its details are not yet perfectly clear. Thus far, the protest and engagement of those who want to keep the burials intact has led to a temporary moratorium.⁷

The Global Challenge and Holy Storytelling

Since life began on this planet, the garden in which we are planted has always been a cemetery, a place where dust returns to dust, and one generation gives way to the next. We know of five times when the garden has experienced great dyings or extinction events. Usually they have been the result of cosmic collisions, large-scale volcanic eruptions, chemical changes to the oceans and atmosphere, and resulting climate shifts. This is the first time a great extinction has been caused by actively digging up the dead. Coal, natural gas, and petroleum are the remains of plants and animals that died some sixty to six hundred million years ago. This is also the first great dying that is pretty much the result of the action of one species, unwittingly and ironically named "wise human." Time will tell if we deserve the name we have given ourselves.

The good news is that there is an alternate vision, a story—and group of related stories—that are lending dynamism to those who

⁶ Anjeanette Damon, "Bodies of Reno's Founders in City's Oldest Cemetery to be Exhumed by Developer," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, August 31, 2016, www.rgj.com/story/news/2016/08/29/bodies-renos-founders-citys-oldest-cemetery-exhumed-developer/89556772/.

⁷ Scott Sonner, "Plan to Dig Up, Move Historic Nevada Graves Angers Heirs," *AP The Big Story*, September 22, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/67553aed5680481fb0d19233d2935207/plan-dig-move-historic-nevada-graves-angers-heirs>.

seek a different future. The Lakota and their allies at Standing Rock are also resisting disinterment. They do not want their own burials profaned, they do not want the earth or their water sources polluted by digging up ancient remains, nor do they want to see their sacred sites, water sources, and homeland desecrated yet again by treaty violations. They are standing in solidarity not only with their own families, but *Aho Mitákuye Oyás'ın*, with “all our relations”—all the creatures of this earth. They have a vision for a life-giving garden, rather than a place of expanding death.⁸

The ironic reality is that our Judeo-Christian heritage has not often been a dynamic resource in this yearning for a different global future. Our tradition has too often emphasized an understanding of the divine word to “have dominion” and “subdue” the earth (Genesis 1:28) as encouraging self-centered exploitation of land and its resources for narrow self-interest. We have mis-heard and misremembered the story in ways that would never have made sense two or three millennia ago. At the very least, having “dominion” means caring for the garden like a benevolent ruler—and the deeper roots of that word meant *house* or *home* before they ever meant *kingdom*. The work we have been given is to be husbanders and housekeepers of the home of all creation.

Subduing the earth, if you go back and look carefully, is about helping the earth be fruitful, not dominating it or stripping it of every life-giving resource.⁹ The Israelite settlers had rocky, dry earth to work with, which needed moisture to bring forth life and working and tending to be fruitful. Their job was to build a bountiful seedbed. The same reality applies to the second creation story (Genesis 2–3)—human beings also come from the earth, need moisture for life, and need guarding and tending to be ultimately fruitful. This reality is part of the deep structure of creation, which might be seen as its fractal nature: it is self-similar at different magnifications, and all of it reflects its divine origin. It begins to remind us that all the parts of creation are connected, that all have their home in the One who created, and that the whole cannot be healthy if the parts are not.

⁸ Note the contrast with the narrower tribal self-interest of those encamped at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016.

⁹ See Theodore Hiebert, “Rethinking Dominion Theology,” *Direction* 25.2 (Fall 1996): 16–25, for an accessible examination of theologies of dominion and interdependence.

This is the broad story the Lakota and their siblings are telling at Standing Rock. Many Lakota people are Episcopalians, members of the Dioceses of North and South Dakota, and Episcopal Church leaders have been centrally involved in Dakota Access Pipeline activism as well. It is the story we must keep telling and retelling with as much *dunamis* as we can muster: that we are all relatives, made for truly loving and fruitful connection at the deepest level. It is a story that has too long been forgotten or suppressed in the imperial, industrial, technological processes and philosophies that have so shaped western societies. We have replaced that original story of connection with *trompe l'oeil* networks and proximity substitutes in cyberspace. Those lighter links may have their own kind of beauty and utility, which can certainly foster some kinds of connection, but they cannot replace incarnate expressions of stories told, tears shed, bodies embraced, and meals shared.

Jesus himself gave witness to our deep interconnectedness with all that is, beginning with his birth in a manger and frequent association with sheep and shepherds (Luke 2), his post-baptismal wilderness experience among wild animals (Mark 1:13), his repeated retreat to wild places (Luke 5:16 and 6:12; Matthew 14:13, 23 and 17:1; Mark 6:31–32), his embrace of all sorts and conditions of humanity, and his mandate to care for the least and the lost and the left out (Matthew 25:31–46, among others), as well as his dominion relationship with sea and storm, fish and water, wine and fig tree—a relationship sometimes described as “nature miracles.” His teaching notes God’s concern for birds and beasts and draws on the non-human creation as exemplary of righteous human behavior (Matthew 6:25–34, 7:6–27, 13:31–43). The Christian tradition has at times affirmed (in writers such as Meister Eckhart, Matthew Fox, and Richard Rohr) that the Incarnation and Resurrection have implications for all creation, beyond the more frequent affirmation that Jesus is savior of all humanity (1 Timothy 4:10). John’s gospel is perhaps most explicit in affirming Jesus as the divine Word incarnate, preexisting creation and active within it.

One gift of the experience in Standing Rock has been the challenge to other Christians to recognize our shared responsibility for the right and just use of God’s creation, including the impact of its misuse on human brothers and sisters among the “least of these.” Giving voice to the Lakota lament is helping others to find their own dynamic call toward a vision of God’s kingdom and *shalom* for all creation.

The Effective Word at Work

There is good news of awakening awareness of our intimate interconnectedness. In early October 2016 an agreement was signed in Rwanda to limit the production and use of hydrofluorocarbons.¹⁰ Like the global agreement to address a growing ozone hole by limiting the use of Freon, this is a similar, second-generation accord to limit the use of refrigerants which have far greater heat-trapping potential than other greenhouse gases (GHGs), and while at present they only comprise about 3 percent of emissions, their use is growing, particularly in developing nations.¹¹ The agreement gives evidence of creative compromise, recognizing the differential contributions of various countries and the longer time frames for adaptation needed in developing nations. It is a diplomatic and economic nod to our interconnectedness—and it was signed in a nation very much aware of the cost of war between siblings and neighbors.

There is good news in the Paris climate accords of December 2015, another dawning affirmation of our global connectedness and the need for cooperation and creativity in seeking a more abundant future for all.

But there is plenty of reason to continue to be concerned and active—*dynamically* involved. Warming brings climate change, more extreme weather, stronger storms and floods. It is causing species extinctions, crop failures, rising sea level, melting glaciers and icecaps, coastal and island flooding, as well as drought and wildfire. The ocean is becoming more acidic as more CO₂ dissolves in sea water, making life harder for corals and for the planktonic snails (pteropods) that are an important food source for other species like Pacific salmon, since increased acidity raises the metabolic cost of laying down calcareous shells and skeletons.

A number of the ways in which we produce all those GHGs contribute to other kinds of pollution: heavy metals and mining waste

¹⁰ Bradley Klapper and Ignatius Ssuuna, “Global Deal Reached to Limit Powerful Greenhouse Gases,” *AP The Big Story*, October 15, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/5b168e763e184c65b1afdd06c6e4fff2/global-deal-reached-limit-powerful-greenhouse-gases>.

¹¹ For example, the people of India are beginning to be able to afford small air conditioning units. See Michael Greenstone, “India’s Air-Conditioning and Climate Change Quandary,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/10/27/upshot/indias-air-conditioning-and-climate-change-quandary.html.

are entering surface waters and aquifers, and soot particles make ice melt faster by reducing albedo (a measure of reflectivity). The loss of the polar ice pack and permafrost not only increases coastal flooding in Florida and Bangladesh, it is reducing the viability of polar bears, caribou herds, and the native peoples who depend on them as food sources. A vicious feedback loop means that warming thaws permafrost and frozen methane deposits, which add even more CO₂ and CH₄ to the atmosphere. Rising sea levels in the South Pacific are forcing the relocation of island communities as their gardens are infiltrated by seawater and their homes disappear beneath the waves. Those are not just land losses, they are spiritual and cultural losses—the extinction of ancestral homelands and lifeways. The rising lament echoes that of the Israelites exiled to Babylon: “How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4).

The Eastern Pacific coastal waters (west and north of the Californias) have experienced unprecedented changes and die-offs in the last couple of years. The “blob” of warm water that lingered offshore brought toxic algal blooms and shut down large segments of the fishing industry. It also brought starvation to birds and sea lions, plummeting salmon runs, and unprecedented whale mortality from toxins and infection. It was accompanied by changed weather patterns and unusual beach visitors, including tropical and subtropical fish and other species as far north as Alaska, and a blue jellyfish-like creature, *Velella velella*, that washed up in droves on Pacific beaches more than a year ago.¹²

Those unusual events exemplify what is likely to expand across the globe. The emerging diseases that have killed and terrified human beings in the last decade are similar harbingers. Many spread from other species: new flu viruses (often hosted in pigs or birds), HIV and Ebola (which originated in other African primates), and mosquito-transmitted viruses like Dengue, Chikungunya, and Zika. Closer contact between human and wild animal populations, eating bush meat when other food sources are scarce, and more densely populated cities are all factors in these increased and emerging zoonoses and epidemics. So is the increasing geographic range of a number of disease

¹² Jane J. Lee and Sherry L. Brukbacher, “Pictures: Billions of Blue Jellyfish Wash Up on American Beaches,” *National Geographic*, April 20, 2015, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/04/150420-velella-jellyfish-pictures-california-beach-ocean-animals-science/>.

vectors, mosquitoes in particular. A parallel can be seen in the decimation of bats and bees in North America, and the consequences for pollination failures in food crops.

Perhaps the most central truth of this lament is that it is all connected. We are part of the whole; we are not in charge of the whole, and whatever our socioeconomic status, ultimately we cannot avoid the destruction that results from misusing the whole. Yes, we can still grow enough food in this country to feed its inhabitants. The world can still grow enough to feed its current population. But what is continually in the news? Food shortages, food insecurity, the fact that half of American school children qualify for free and reduced-cost meals, and homeless populations are continuing to rise. We may have enough now, but we do not have the will to distribute it equitably. The refugee crisis in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East and the migration pressures in Latin America are a result not just of political instability, but of economic inequality and the basic human yearning for enough to eat—and the yearning to be free of worrying about having enough to eat.

The want in this world is not going to be cured by building walls or fences. San Diego realized quite graphically that sewage pays no attention to border security, but a partnership between Mexican and U.S. agencies has helped to fund and improve treatment in Tijuana.¹³ We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, whether we want to be or not—and they are ours. Jesus said it clearly: "Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house" (Luke 11:17). Pogo said it decades ago: "We have met the enemy and they is us!" We are responsible for the health of this global system, and we all suffer or thrive as a consequence of how we care for it.

The spiritual response to truth-telling lament is a turn-around, moving in another direction, or, in more traditional language, conversion and amendment of life. The wisdom of our ancestors tells us that a life-giving story gives dynamism to the turning. Where are we bound? What do we seek? Can we give voice to the hope that is within us? Will we turn in at Dame Wisdom's urging, and share the meal she and her prophet Jesus offer to all (Luke 7:35, 11:49)?

¹³ California State Assembly Committee on Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials, "EPA's Border Water Program and the Tijuana River," March 2015, <http://aesm.assembly.ca.gov/sites/aesm.assembly.ca.gov/files/EPA%20%20Tijuana%20River%20Watershed%20March%202015.pdf>.

Will we continue to focus inward, spiraling down the drain of self-centered nihilism, or will we face outward to embrace all that is life-giving? Jesus' friends know that it begins in showing up—physically, consciously, and spiritually. Being fully present is what it means to love God, self, and neighbor as oneself. Take a deep breath, and notice how your body opens—even more so if you reach out to a neighbor. That is where our tradition locates the gift of life—the divine breath and inspiring Word given and breathed into us—and not just individually but together as a community.

Recall those blue jellyfish-like creatures that washed up on Pacific beaches. *Verella* is actually a colony, a community of different organisms with different functions and abilities. Each of those little rafts thrives or dies as one, blown where the wind wills. They come in two varieties (isomers), a left-handed one and a right-handed one—and the winds sort them out. One kind mostly ends up on the American west coast and the other kind on the far side of the Pacific. Each is important to the survival of the species.

It is past time to awaken to our need for one another, and the great gift of the diversity of creation. We all die a little each time another species disappears from this earth and its possibility is removed from the created order.

We *can* change the trajectory, and the possibilities are all around us—eating locally and lower on the food chain (more plants and less animal food), planting gardens and sharing the produce, turning cities into food forests. We *can* shift from fossil fuel to renewables, and the solar panels increasingly being blessed and installed on church buildings are a wonderful example. Church Divinity School of the Pacific recently installed the largest solar array of any U.S. seminary, and the Diocese of California has challenged all its congregations to shift to solar power. The green roofs emerging on many others are another—they cool what is below, remove CO₂ and return oxygen, clean and diffuse roof runoff, and in some cases will eventually yield vegetable crops.

We *can* remember the gift of sitting in the garden and giving thanks for what God has given—and spending more time in the garden and less in the air is going to be necessary. A cross-country flight costs about as much as each person's annual share of carbon (if GHG contributions were equitably distributed). We are not likely to find a technological fix in the very near future, and we are going to have to limit our frequent flier miles if warming is to be kept to a manageable

level. The friendships and awareness of other global realities that come with air travel will have to be nurtured locally or virtually until we find cooler alternatives.

We *can* and must limit our consumptive lifestyles, recalling that “consumption” used to be a euphemism for tuberculosis, a “wasting” disease. We can learn to reduce, reuse, recycle, and reexamine our “needs” from a spiritual base that considers the needs of all our neighbors. Doing this work in community strengthens our interdependence. We become far more creative when we draw on the gifts and insights of others—and we have immensely challenging political work to do that will need all the creativity and courage we can muster. The capacity for creative work, done in community, is what it means to be made in the image of God, and the story we tell about that is key to the future the earth will inherit.

The Anthropocene Age—the current geologic age characterized by human contributions to the fossil record such as plastics, radioactive nuclides, changed carbon signatures, garbage, and concrete, among others—has at least two potential outcomes. The next mass extinction has already begun, and this one might expand as far as the human species. Or it might result in a new kind of cosmic biotic consciousness and collective will to encourage the flourishing of all life on this planet. The necessary spiritual undergirding for that is already with us and within us, if we will only show up and tell the truth about what is, and share God’s dream for a different future. The choice is ours. We can continue the self-centered death spiral, or we can pray and work for the death of self-centeredness within us and our communities, and learn to live far more abundantly for the health and wholeness of the entire creation (Deuteronomy 30:15–20).

Christians believe there is no question about God’s word of creative life-giving possibility: it will prevail, it is the ultimate meaning of the Resurrection. The question is whether and how that future will include human beings—and whether our actions today will leave an expansive or a deprived future for those who come after us. The dynamic and effective Word has been planted in us. I came that you might have life abundant, Jesus says (John 10:10), and that includes *all* life. Are our hearts vulnerable enough to reflect that word into the world around us, responding with dynamite and *dunamis*?

