

Walk in Beauty
Genesis 1:1-2:4
September 3, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

This is from the Navajo Beauty Way prayer:

*In beauty I walk
With beauty before me I walk
With beauty behind me I walk
With beauty above me I walk
With beauty around me I walk
It has become beauty again*

In traditional Navajo spirituality, to walk in beauty is to celebrate the sacredness of life by living in pure harmony with oneself, with other people, and with all Creation. And they mean that harmony in a deep way that most of us would never consider. One of my favorite authors, Tony Hillerman, writes murder mysteries set in Navajo culture. Here is how he describes the Navajo approach to nature, even in times of drought, in contrast to their neighbors the Hopis:

The Hopis, [he writes] had held a rain dance Sunday, calling on the clouds – their ancestors – to restore the water blessing the land. Perhaps the kachinas had listened to their Hopi children. Perhaps not. It was not a Navajo concept, this idea of adjusting nature to human needs. The Navajo adjusted himself to remain in harmony with the universe. When nature withheld the rain, the Navajo sought the pattern of this phenomenon – as he sought the pattern of all things – to find its beauty and live in harmony with it.

So, for Navajos, beauty is not at all about how we look, but about how we live, about our ability to find peace with everything around us, our willingness to honor Creation in whatever way it presents itself to us. To walk in beauty is to understand how our sacred life fits in with our history and our neighbors and our world, all of them equally sacred. To walk in beauty is to tread lightly upon the earth.

Our scripture this morning is the first Creation story, which Su read so beautifully a moment ago. I always want to begin the fall with the Creation because it is the right place to launch into the story of our faith. This morning, I want to focus particularly on the sixth day, and think about what it tells us about our relationship to the rest of Creation. The text says,

And God said, Let the earth bring forth living creatures: cattle, and creeping things, and beasts of the earth.... And God saw that it was good. ²⁶ And God said, Let us make humankind in our image... and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth.... ²⁷ So God created humankind in God's own image, ... male and female God created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing.... ³¹ And God saw everything that God had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

This is the culmination of God's creative work – God creates humankind in God's own image, and God sets us immediately to work, subduing the earth and having dominion of the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air and over every living thing. To subdue. To have dominion. Those words have been used as an excuse, as divine authorization for all the ways that people have pillaged the planet. "We're in charge. God said so. We can do whatever we want."

But that is a misreading of this text. Remember that we ourselves had only just been created, and we were made in the image of God. So, God set humankind up as God's partners, to act with authority *as God would act* in caring for God's beautiful Creation. We are to be shepherds, servant leaders on God's behalf – not tyrants, free to abuse what God has just created.

And we have gone so far off that path. I don't claim any special virtue here. I drive an internal combustion car, like most of you. My life insulates me from the vicissitudes of nature in ways that I appreciate. But our privilege in overcoming nature rather than living in harmony with it will come eventually at great cost. It already is. The Gulf of Mexico is so warm this year that it took a little storm like Idalia and heated it up to Category 4 and then flung it at Florida. We did that.

And so, on this Labor Day weekend, when many of us will be out enjoying the lake, let us give thanks for this beautiful corner of God's Creation. And let us take a small step, just some small step, toward living as God created us to live, as shepherds of Creation, not as tyrants over it. If we are not already in harmony with nature, then let us at least walk in that direction.

*In beauty may we walk
With beauty before us, may we walk
With beauty behind us, may we walk
With beauty above us, may we walk
With beauty around us, may we walk
May all become beauty again*

Amen