

THE PROCESS OF PREPARING A CREATION PREACHING

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I am preparing a creation preaching for the Easter Vigil. The Creation account (Genesis 1-2:2) is the first reading in a service that also has readings from Exodus, the prophets, Romans and Mark's Gospel. There are many readings, the hour is late and I remind myself to be focused and brief.

Before I proceed to the "work" of preparing, I need to take a first step in prayer. The emphasis of this prayer will be on listening to the Word. Two listening steps at this stage are most helpful. First, I use the passage for quiet reflective reading and contemplative prayer. Time permitting, I usually do this over a period of several days. I try to keep this from becoming a composing session; I deliberately do not take notes during the prayer time. After each prayer period I may jot some thoughts. Sometimes I use a verse from the passage as a mantra to help me be quiet, slowly repeating it when I am restless or distracted—which I frequently am! I am an itinerant preacher, not a monk. I do not always have an ideal spot for this period of prayer. It might be at a window seat on a flight across the country, or in a guest room in a rectory. Wherever it is, I do try to be still and listen. When I approach the creation account in this manner, I am struck by God's trust in giving over to us what God has lovingly and carefully made. In contrast, I am aware that previous church attitudes have been patronizing about creation, suggesting a kind of dominion that does not take into regard its fragility and our responsibility to care for it.

A second form of listening: I try to be part of a reflection group that discusses and prays from the passage. I always find this a rich source of input in the listening process. The best sessions happen when the group is varied in age, gender, race, economic background, and denomination.

What I heard in one group added to my own initial impressions. A woman who loves gardening noticed that in this story, God is like a gardener carefully creating the natural world the way she plants a garden. A man expressed sadness at what we creatures have done to God's beautiful garden, "We hurt other humans and waste the environment, treating creatures as if all were disposable." A young mother reflects on God's invitation to, "have dominion". She points to the child in her lap and says, "God's dominion is like a loving parent taking care of what is tender and innocent, like my infant daughter. That is the way we should have dominion over the created world. Instead we interpret dominion to mean, use it and abuse it." The passage took on an ecological bent, especially for these North Carolinians who mentioned the pollution done in our state to streams, coastal waterways and air by the waste products from huge hog farms owned by out-of-state agribusinesses.

The direction of the conversation blended with my own inclinations. I too was struck by the orderly and caring way in which God goes about the act of creating. The creation that comes from God's hand is sublime and harmonious. One of the themes of this Jubilee year is an invitation to a deeper environmental sensitivity; a call to give the land a Sabbath rest. Our church's Jubilee literature makes strong links between our over consumption and the toll it takes on people and the environment, especially in third world countries. A United Nations study says that diseases related to polluted environment and unsanitary living conditions kill 35,000 children daily. Most of these are third world children under the age of five. The study links this pollution in poor countries to over consumption in first world countries and our demand for cheap third world labor and resources.

At this stage I go to a variety of commentaries for further help and clarification. For this reflection I like the International Bible Commentary, its writers include a variety of men and women theologians and exegetes from the third world. The commentary underlines what the people in the group have discovered, that the creation account shows a divine plan and stresses the goodness of creation.

In this liturgical preaching the Eucharistic rite follows the liturgy of the Word, and the Eucharistic prayer contains words of praise for the God's goodness shown through creation. I decide to draw out this link between the scripture passage and the Eucharistic prayer of praise and thanks that follows the preaching.

So, my listening process for a creation preaching leads me to preach on the care of the earth, to show that care for the earth in environmentally friendly ways is a form of reverencing God, and that when we try to preserve and heal the fragile world in which we live, we are not just doing an act of civic concern but an act of worship uniting us to the Creator who is present in creation and indeed is still creating the world we live in.