

## Sermon for April 24, 2016: “It” Will be my Kingdom

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“I am earth and air and fire and water...I come from the Dark where all things have their beginning...I come from the sea and its tides...I come from the sky and its stars. I come from the sun and its brightness...and I come from the forests of earth...Slowly I moved at first...always sleeping and dreaming. I remembered all I had been and I thought of all I shall be. And when I had dreamed my dream I awoke and came swiftly...I heard the stars singing...I came and I felt warm wings about me. I passed the beasts of the jungle and came through the dark, deep waters. It was a long journey.”

“A long journey, indeed! said the Starling softly.... “And, ah, so soon forgotten!” ...“No!” [Annabel says] confidently. “I’ll never forget.”

That is a passage from “Mary Poppins Comes Back”<sup>1</sup> spoken by the youngest Banks baby on the day of her birth. To the adults and other children around her, little Annabel seems to babbling and cooing, but to the Starling that perches on the nursery window sill and, of course, to Mary Poppins, she clearly relays her tale of creation and birth. But the Starling is right. Annabel quickly forgets her story -and her relationship to the rest of God’s creation, just as all

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<sup>1</sup>P.L. Travers. “Mary Poppins Comes Back.” (1935). New York: Harcourt Brace. Kindle location 46-48.

humans do. And, like the Starling, we are bitterly disappointed. “What a pity,” he says, “what a pity.”

It *is* a pity – because, although P.L. Travers’ account is a fantastic one, it is still poignant because it has the power to remind us that we once held more innocent – and perhaps more accurate – notions about the place of humanity in the world. As children, we readily accept stories about talking animals and walking trees not only because we have not yet been trained to “believe it only if we see it,” but because we have had our own experiences with the living things around us. Brooks babble, waves crash, stars twinkle, and the moon wishes us goodnight.

But somehow that changes – even for those of us who are open to the idea that all of creation is animate, our relationship to our non-human companions changes, and not for the better. P.L. Travers suggests that the shift occurs in relationship to the development of our ability to speak. In her telling, when Annabel’s babbling becomes words, her ability to communicate with the non-human world diminishes and finally disappears. This idea actually makes sense from a scientific perspective because it is the way in which we communicate with one another that sets us apart from other living beings, and, historically, it is what human beings have assumed also makes us “better” or “higher” than plants and other animals.

Humans have used Holy Scriptures to support this view for millennia. Did not God, after all, set “man” above – to rule and to dominate the rest of creation at the beginning of the world? According to Genesis – yes. The Hebrew word we now translate as “have dominion over” does indeed mean, “to rule.” It does not, however, mean “to exploit.” And it’s hard to argue that we humans do not and have not exploited other living creatures. For thousands of years, human beings have understood God’s command to “rule” other parts of creation as meaning, “to use as we see fit.” And the language of “it” has encouraged us to do so.

“It,” is one of the most frequently used words in the English language. We use it to designate “objects” – as opposed to “subjects” which we identify by gendered pronouns. Which is why it’s a dangerous word - because our use of the word “it” allows us to delineate what is truly "alive" and what is not. And that has consequences – because the language of “it” allows us to exploit other beings. The language of “it” provides us with labels that separate some creatures from others. In this place, we may believe all human beings to be “subjects,” but in other cultures and other eras, many people were and still are considered “objects” – “its.” Birds, trees, streams, meadows are “its.” One of the fundamental characteristics of psychopaths is the way they objectify other people, seeing them as things, as “its.” And, of course, we are currently seeing the kind of dehumanization that can occur when a human being does not readily fit into the parameters of gendered language.

It is interesting to note that the Hebrew and Aramaic languages do not have a neutral gender. All Hebrew and Aramaic words are gendered; there is no “it.” So, when today’s psalmist speaks to the sun and moon – the stars and heavens – the waters and sea-monsters – to hail, snow, fog, wind, mountains, hills, trees, beasts and humans, he is speaking to them as equally alive. He is calling out to them in the language which animates all living beings.

That is the language Jesus spoke. It was the language his disciples had to learn before they could carry his message into the world. For Peter, this meant letting go of what he believed to be his superior status as an observant Jew. What is important about the passage we heard from Acts today is not whether Peter’s vision justified his eating of animals forbidden by Jewish cleanliness laws. What is important is where it led him. Go, with the Gentiles who are seeking you, the Spirit tells him, and do not “make a distinction between them” and you, because, “God has given even to the Gentiles” – to the “its” of your society – “the repentance that leads to life.”

What Peter hears in his vision is what Jesus spoke of in life – that the way of Christ is a way of relationship. To truly follow the path of Jesus, we must be in relationship with all of God’s creation. That means that nothing God has created is ours to exploit. It means, rather, that it is ours to protect. It is ours to nurture. It is ours to *grow* – not just physically, but spiritually. Because John’s revelation of a

new heaven and a new earth is not about a *different* world, but a renewed world.

The Jewish apocalyptic eschatological tradition that the book of Revelation comes out of us does not feature the end of the world; it speaks of the redemption of *this* world. The new heaven and the new earth are not objects that God will create, but *existing life* that God will redeem and purify. “The home of God is among mortals.” It is not a far-away place; God’s home is the heart and soul of God’s creation – all of it, living in harmony. It is something we as stewards of the earth and followers of Christ are tasked with bringing about.

And Jesus tells us how to do it. To bring about a new world, we need a new commandment – “love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And not just the “others” that we see as equals. To bring about God’s kingdom among mortals, to make a home where God can dwell *with* us – to bring about the end of pain – the end of tears – the end of *death* – we already have all we need. Love God’s creation as Jesus did and God’s kingdom will come. And *God’s* kingdom is a place where there are no “its.” AMEN.