

## **“A Creature Feature”**

Sermon by Marilyn Matevia, 1/2/11, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Vallejo, CA

Some of you ask me from time to time if I'm going to be ordained, and my answer is unequivocally “no.” Barring some kind of Road-to-Damascus experience, I don't see myself being called to the ministry. But when I was about 5-6 years old, I flirted briefly with the idea. My father is a pastor, as some of you know, and – like any pastor's kid hauled to church every single Sunday of her young life, sitting toward the front of the sanctuary where all the parishioners' eyes are on you so you can't do any of the horsing around the OTHER kids are all doing during church – I had to behave. (Any wonder that I always sit in back, now?) I was allowed to draw if it didn't involve great sweeping arm movements and scratching/etching/erasing noises, but mostly I sat quietly and listened and observed, and just did my drawing during the sermon. (I doubt that I'm giving you any new ideas. And if I start to lose you, you do have those little baby pencils right in front of you...) Eventually, I figured I had the worship proceedings down pat - at least key words and gestures. So on Mondays I would take the Sunday bulletin I had drawn all over, or I would make my own, and I would hold a worship service in my bedroom. I'd push my dresser out from the wall and stand on a chair behind it and preach God-knows-what to my throngs of stuffed animals (and sometimes my mother could be roped in to sit on the edge of the bed and endure part of the service). For the finale, I would commune the animals with popcorn or crackers or Cheerios. I remember only these procedural details. My mother recalls that my words of institution were, “Take, eat, it's good.”

Since I was communing stuffed animals at age 5, it will come as no surprise that I had some empathy for an Anglican priest in Toronto who found herself at the center of quite a hubbub last summer. There was a fellow who sat outside on the steps of her church with his dog, every single day, just “meditating” and watching passersby. There was never any trouble with this - he was known and liked by parishioners. But on the day of a World Trade Organization demonstration, he got hassled by the police. He was offended and upset, and he went into the church to complain to the priest. She provided a sympathetic ear and then, of course, invited him to the service the following Sunday. To everyone's pleasant surprise, the fellow came... with his dog. They sat together in the pew, and when it was time for communion, he and the dog went to the front of the church. When the priest came to the pair, the dog looked up at her expectantly, with his tongue hanging out. The priest cooed at the dog, placed a wafer on his tongue, and went on with the distribution. As luck would have it, a parishioner complained to the bishop, and the priest was chastised, privately and in press. She apologized to the congregation the next week – explaining that she wasn't trying to make some kind of controversial theological stand. Her actions were completely spontaneous and well-meaning: the dog wanted a treat, and she had a whole plate full of them.

Now you're checking the bulletin and noticing that we have communion today, and you're probably getting a little worried. I promise we're not going to end up on the evening news. But I do think it's enlightening to think about why that priest's actions were so upsetting to so many – and indeed, it did generate a flurry of bad publicity for the church, lots of heated exchanges about doctrine in the “comments” sections anywhere the story was carried on the internet. Lots

of angst about making a mockery of the Eucharist.

I want to suggest there's a little bit of irony in that - in the concern about the integrity and dignity of the Eucharist. Because the communion that we share right here at our little table every couple of weeks is, as we sing, "a foretaste of the feast to come." And by that we mean a foretaste of the divine Communion in which all creation, the whole cosmos, is united with the Creator, through Jesus Christ. This is God's plan "for the fullness of time," as Paul writes in our second reading. God's plan, set into motion through Christ, who will "gather up all things... things in heaven and things on earth." Paul leaves no doubt that God's intention for "the fullness of time" involves ALL creation: Christ "is the head of all things" and "fills all in all," he writes later in Ephesians (Eph. 1.23); and from his first letter to Colossians, first chapter, Christ "creates all things" (Col. 1.15), "holds all things together" (Col. 1.17), and "reconciles all things" (Col. 1.20); and from the first chapter of Hebrews, Christ "sustains all things" (Heb. 1.3), and is the "heir of all things" (Heb. 1.10). All things, not just all people. In our modern fixation on individual, personal salvation, we have lost sight of the communal aspects of, well, communion.

And we have studiously ignored, and in every possible way denied, our connection to our fellow creatures. "And the word became flesh and lived among us," John writes. In the reading Pastor Steve shared with us last week from Martin Luther's Christmas Book, Luther delights in the genius of God's plan - incarnating Christ as an infant - sweet, innocent, appealing, non-threatening. How can you resist? But let's go back a step. The word became *flesh*. God's Word became a *creature* and lived among us. True, God's Word became a creature of the human

persuasion – 2- leggeds with Very Big Brains and the capacity to make fires and tools and use language and change global weather patterns. But a creature just the same – and so *just* as much like the Chinook salmon currently trying to stage a comeback in the upper Columbia River, or the whale hanging out in Tomales Bay this weekend, or the dog that took communion in Toronto. As Elizabeth Johnson wrote last year, “Jesus of Nazareth was an earthling, a complex unit of minerals and fluids, an item in the carbon, oxygen and nitrogen cycles, a moment in the biological evolution of this planet. The atoms comprising his body once belonged to other creatures. The genetic structure of his cells made him part of the whole community of life that descended from common ancestors in the ancient seas. The (flesh) (referred to in) Jn 1:14 thus reaches beyond Jesus, and beyond all other human beings, to encompass the whole biological world of living creatures and the cosmic dust of which they are composed.”<sup>1</sup>

“And the Word became an earthling and lived among earthlings.” Well, that has a different ring to it, doesn't it? God “entered into solidarity... with the whole biophysical world...”<sup>2</sup> If we really grasped this fact, it should be perspective-changing: it should turn us from an instrumental view of creation and our fellow creatures, to a sacramental one. From looking for ways to use creation and our fellow creatures, to looking for ways to honor and sustain them. Quoting Elizabeth Anderson again, “In place of spiritual contempt for matter, people of faith are called to ally themselves with the living God by loving matter. In place of an exclusive concern for human neighbors, they extend moral consideration to the whole community of life. In place of ecological wastefulness, they repent of the grievous sins of polluting, (over)consuming and

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1 Elizabeth Johnson, “An Earthy Christology,”  
[http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=11566](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=11566)

2 Ibid.

killing other species into extinction. They do this because the earth and its creatures, as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, have been blessed by the stirring of the spirit and the simple, concrete act of Christ's redemptive immersion in matter.” *The earth and its creatures have been blessed by the stirring of the spirit and the simple, concrete act of Christ's redemptive immersion in matter.* Whoa, as Pr. Steve might say.

When Pastor Steve asked me for a tentative sermon title, I rather hastily looked over the lessons and said, “how about something like 'All in the Family,'” which is what you see in the bulletin. I wish I'd thought just a bit longer. I think I would call this “A Creature Feature.” The Christmas story – the Christ event – is a creation story, part of the ongoing creation story. John signals this, rather symbolically, when he opens his Gospel with the first three words of Genesis: “*In the beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him no one thing came into being.” Again: *all things* came into being through him. Now, if we were filming this creation epic, this would be the point when the director orders the cameras to pan back. Get a wider angle on things. Enough with the human close-ups. We are *a part of* creation, however desperately we want to set ourselves *apart from* creation. Our well-being and our fates are linked and shared with the rest of creation. For centuries, theologians and philosophers have diligently documented and itemized the ways in which human beings differ from other animals – the ways in which we surpass them, the things that make us special and unique. But we are also “creatures of the same God.” In fact, if God is Creator/Mother/Father, then God's creatures are kin... siblings, even. Family. As Lutheran eco-theologian Larry Rasmussen says, “the createds

are all related.”<sup>3</sup> St. Francis of Assisi – who was known to address other creatures as 'brother' and 'sister' - was way ahead of us on this one. Likewise Joseph Sittler, and Sallie McFague. Leonardo Boff wrote these wonderful lines: “As portions of the universe, we are all brothers and sisters: elementary particles, quarks, stones, snails, animals, humans, stars, galaxies. Once, we were all together in the form of energy and the original particles, in the primordial sphere, then we were in the giant red stars, then in our Milky Way, in the Sun, and on Earth. We are made of the same elements... We make up a great cosmic community. We have a common origin and certainly a single common destiny.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a wonderful mosaic that I hope to see in person one day, in the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome. It is large and kind of concave and it is apparently difficult to get a good single photograph of it. I encourage you to go onto their web site and take the “virtual tour” of the sanctuary. I've printed a so-so picture of it here, and will leave it up here on the pew if you want to take a look at it. In it, the crucifix appears in the center of the cosmos, and is depicted as something like the tree of life: at the foot of the cross, lush green foliage is growing, and rivers of life are streaming out in all directions from it; deer, geese and peacocks feed nearby, and further out, a shepherd herds his flock, and a woman scatters feed to her chickens. Doves are shown on the post and cross-bar of the crucifix. It is a remarkable and unusual work in its own right, and a marvelous illustration of the Cosmic Christ – who is the “head of all things,” “holds all things together” and “reconciles all things.”

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3 Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 262.

4 Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 45.

For so long, we have made this story all about us. Christ came for human beings. Not for the rest of creation. *And* he's our ticket outta here. Believe in him and be whisked up to heaven, while those “left behind” are swallowed up in earthquakes and volcanoes and tsunamis and the total annihilation of the whole beautiful, intricate, amazing creation that God loves so much he sent his only son to be a part of it. Maybe, in a way, and in contrast to the opinion of those folks who were so upset about the priest in Toronto, maybe we diminish the Eucharist and the whole Christ event when we make it all about us.