

# Nature, God's Great Project

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Let us reflect together this morning by weaving our thoughts on a loom of images. Let the images construct a whole picture, an entire world of thought.

## God's Project Includes Nature

Bricolage-the first image. A bricoleur in French is a jack-of-all-trades; he makes things out of whatever is at hand, and what he makes is bricolage. My grandmother and my mother made their borscht that way. Mother used to say that whenever she had too many leftovers in the 'fridge, it was time to make that tasty Eastern European beet soup. It could absorb the leftovers, and they in turn gave the soup character. That's bricolage. Or think of "junk art." There's an example on the lawn of the Presbyterian seminary down the street from our Lutheran seminary in Chicago-an imposing 15-foot high ram, composed of shiny scrap automobile bumpers. That's bricolage.

Why bricolage this morning? Because our theme is nature, and scientists tell us that's the way nature works. That's the way evolution works. Paleontologists have documented marvelously how the bones in our heads that structure our jaws and our ears developed from the bony structures of primitive fishes' gill slits-that's bricolage. Brain researchers have depicted the human brain in terms of its history-we carry within us the fossil remnants of ancestral brains, the reptilian, the early mammalian, and these are integrated with what is uniquely human. A good deal of our emotional life may be intertwined with the struggle to teach those ancestors to live in a brain that is now human. That's bricolage.

Cell biologists tell us how even the cells of our bodies show traces of the amalgamation, or symbiosis, of two or more earlier organisms that have collaborated to create something new. These biologists suggest that the movement of evolution from the simplest organisms to the complex is a process of amalgamation, symbiosis. Perhaps we could call it evolution's leveraged takeover, in which a number of corporations are welded together to form a new entity. That's bricolage.

Like the sculptor of the Presbyterian ram, nature's evolution makes new things by putting together the parts and mechanisms that are at hand. The procedure is not so much to create something brand new out of shiny new parts, but rather to reconfigure what is already there into the genuinely novel and unique. As a result, we find scientists pointing to the fact that we share a large proportion of our DNA with other creatures-over 80% with earthworms, over 95% with certain monkeys and apes. That's a signal of bricolage having taken place.

When we take this scientific message seriously and let it sink in, it deeply affects our image of ourselves, doesn't it? We often think of our relation to the rest of nature in terms of nature as a house in which we are tenants. This is a useful image, but what I am talking about is more akin to genetic relatedness. The rest of nature is not so much our house as our sibling.

Does that bring nature a little too close? Does it take away the nobility and superiority that we may want to cling to? Humans as the crown of creation? That ram is at the top of a grassy bank, lord of all he surveys, king of the mountain-but he's made out of scrap bumpers. There would be no human beings like us if the elements that make up our bodies had not been created in the fiery furnaces of galaxies, eons before there was even a planet earth. The gold and silver we wear as jewelry, the zinc, cadmium and other minerals in our bodies, the fluoride we use for dental hygiene-these all originated in the galactic furnaces billions of years ago. We may be crown of creation, but we're made out of the scrap the Jack-of-all-trades Creator found at hand.

A second image-dust of the ground. "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). Oh, you say, so we knew about bricolage all along. We have heard ever since the second chapter of Genesis that when God created us, God used scrap materials. Only there weren't any car bumpers around, so God used what was available, and it happened to be dirt. One of my colleagues, a learned Old Testament scholar, says that in the ancient Hebrew view, human beings are God's "dirtlings," because we have been made out of the dirt of the ground. In fact, the word "Adam" has as its root the same word that means "earth" or "dust." Our brain has to teach the reptile and early mammal in us to act and look and be like a human. The sculptor had to teach the chrome bumpers to look and be like a ram. God breathed spirit into us, so that the dirt, the dust of the earth, would act like and be a living human being.

It was there all the time in our Holy Book, humans created out of the dust, bricolage. But it takes on new meaning, new depth and detail when the scientist puts it in scientific concepts. The scientist who describes evolution tells us what it really means for us to have been created out of dust. Or is it the other way around, that the Bible tells us what the most real possibilities of dust and its evolution really are? But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

### God's Project With Nature Is Truly Great

A third image-the image of God. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27).

Here's something about nature that the science doesn't tell us-it's not the business of science to do so. They may be scrap automobile bumpers. They may be brains that ascended from the reptiles and the early mammals. They may be cells whose parts were once swimming separately in the primeval soup. But their calling, their destiny is best described as creation in the image of God. Isn't the dust of the earth too lowly and inferior to be associated with the image of God? Isn't it bordering on sacrilege to suggest that brains that have amalgamated the reptile and the early mammal are transmuted into spirit, as the image of God? Some people respond negatively to this idea, because they think that it diminishes the God-given calling of human beings to associate them too closely with nature. "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Car bumpers and dirt and nature are not diminutions, unless people in their minds demean bumpers and nature

and dirt. Apparently God does not do so. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." The image of God tells us what the true destiny of dirt is. The cells formed by symbiosis of the more primitive, brains formed by the integration of the more primitive-these are not destined to remain dirt and primitive cells and brains that think like lizards. No, God has greater things in store for the nature that God has created-it is to be God's image and likeness on earth!

The fourth image-our second lesson, from Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-all things have been created through him and for him. he himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

. . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross. (Colossians 1: 15-20).

In theological terms, this is the image of the cosmic Christ. One of our church's greatest theologians, Joseph Sittler, was a leading proclaimer of the cosmic Christ. In his own commentary on this passage of Scripture, he underscored the verse, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" with these words. This radioactive earth, so fecund and so fragile, is God's creation, our sister, and the material place where we meet the brother or sister in Christ's light. "We are driven," Sittler said, "to claim the world of nature for God's Christ." The question comes back, "Is it possible to fashion a theology to affirm redemption's force enfolding nature?"

Is it possible to affirm Christ's redeeming work in terms large enough to include nature? Colossians says that it is, and that it must be done. After all, if we are dirtlings, if we, in the inmost precious center of our mental life are created by bricolage, car bumpers and all-then if Christ's redemption does not include nature, it cannot truly include us!

The cosmic Christ of Colossians says that not only is it nature's destiny to be the image of God on earth, it is nature's destiny to be redeemed in Jesus Christ. "Through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or in heaven."

Science tells us that we are thoroughly nature, and the Genesis creation story confirms it.

That is the thrust of our first two images-bricolage and dust of the earth. Nature is God's project. Our faith tradition tells us that nature is also God's great project. Hence the second two images, image of God and cosmic Christ. It is not enough for dust to be only dust, for old car bumpers to be only scrap in the junk yard. God is doing something with dust and scrap, God has plans for nature. It is to be molded by God in God's image, and it is to share in the work of Christ through redemption. The project God has made of nature is truly called to be great.

## What God's Great Project Is All About

But what are we to do as part of this great project of God's? What does it mean for nature to be part of God's image and Christ's redemption? Two final images:

The rainbow covenant made to Noah-our Old Testament lesson (Genesis 9:8-17)-and showing love to all people as God sends rain and sunshine upon all-our Gospel lesson (Matthew 5:43-48). The rainbow covenant tells us that nature is part of God's covenant.

"This is the sign of the covenant that I make with every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.... This is the sign of the covenant between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

What is the covenant of God? It is the establishment of belonging. "I am your God and you are my people"-belonging with God. The people are a people-they belong to one another. The mark of this covenant belong is shalom, peace. Jesus said at the Last Supper that his blood was the new covenant, given for all for the forgiveness of sins. In the voice from the rainbow, God included the earth and all its living creatures in that covenant, in that peace. The same dust of the earth that God scooped up, breathed into, and made a living human being. How do people act within the covenant? They act as is appropriate to a relationship of belonging. God will never forsake the covenant partners, and the partners are also called never to forsake one another or God. Love and peace-these are what belonging is all about. And the nature around us, as well as the nature that is within us, the nature out of which we are made, is a full member of that covenant belonging.

Sun, rain, and love for the enemy. This passage from the Sermon on the Mount is one of the most intriguing sections of the Gospel. Jesus had a sense of a relationship with God that was direct and immediate. God was his intimate Father, "Abba, Father." "Abba" was the way children referred to their fathers in intimacy and love. But Jesus also considered nature to be part of this intimate relationship with the Father. He could urge his listeners to take note of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, because the flowers and the animals were living in the hand of a loving God as surely as men and women and children. So Jesus could speak in this remarkable manner: Love for all people, even for the enemy-why that's just like God's action in the sun and the rain. Sun and rain bring good things-crops, food, pleasure. And God does not restrict them; even the so-called "bad" people get their share of sun and rain. That's a model for our human love-it should be shed abroad like sun and rain, and it should be shown to enemies as well as to friends. This is what nature is supposed to be doing, what Jesus did, show love. Rain and sunshine are non-human ways that nature loves. When nature is in the form of the human dirtling, in the form of the dust that has been breathed into, it is supposed to follow the example of the sun and rain-pour itself out regardless of whether the persons loved is good or bad, sinner or saint, friend or enemy. Jesus doesn't say that sun and rain are impersonal, whereas love is personal and free. No, he says that sun and rain are as personal as God himself, and that love should be poured out like rain and sun-across all boundaries. Sun, rain, love-it's all one process for Jesus, because God is active in it

all and has purposes for it all. It's all one process. The purpose for which the sun exists is to shine. The purpose for which the human dirtling exists is to love as God has shown us love.

When I began these reflections, I suggested that we reflect together by weaving our thoughts on a loom of images, letting the images construct a whole picture, an entire world of thought. Let the images do their weaving: bricolage, dust of the earth, image of God, cosmic Christ, rainbow covenant, and sun-rain-love. Do you see an entire world in those images? There is a whole world there. You and I were made by God in the galactic furnaces billions of years ago; we were made in the primeval soup millions of years ago; we were made in the gill slits of the fish and in the burgeoning central nervous system of the shrews and chimpanzees. But we were made by God and in God's image, destined for Christ's redeeming work-and the image and the redemption apply to our nature. And it doesn't stop there-we were made for belonging and love. As natural creatures we were made for this.

It is an entire world, and it is more than we can really understand. It is grace, and grace is always beyond our ken. But the grace is real. It began in the furnaces of the galaxies and in the Big Bang that brought them forth. It began in dust of the earth, and it continued in the structuring of our DNA.

But remember, the scrap automobile bumpers did not put themselves together like a ram, and the dust of the earth did not on its own become the image of God. No, they needed an artist's vision. They needed to be breathed into by God. We are the nature that God breathed into. Science reminds us that we are dust, and for that we are grateful; that message is a gift from God; thus science tells us who we are and where we came from. Our Gospel tradition tells us that this dust has been breathed into by God's spirit, and in this way our faith tells us what we and all of nature are destined to become, the image of God and the redeemed in Christ. This is also God's gift. Let us give God the thanks for it.