

World Day of Prayer International Committee Meeting

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Opening Celebration – Reflection Time – Genesis 1

Seeking Wisdom to Care for God’s Creation

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In the beginning...

To open this reflection, I invite you to revisit that place, the place of the beginning.

The beginning, which in the text appears as “the beginning of creation”, but which in the text itself, and in our lives, can be the search for meaning - the search for purpose. At any given time in our history, we stop to ask ourselves about the beginning, the meaning of life, as we will see as we study the text.

Sometimes, reflecting, placing our hearts beyond that beginning helps us understand or seek new ways to understand what we are experiencing at this particular moment in time. And every time we revisit the beginning, we find a different meaning, because our questions about life, about reality, are also different according to the different stages of our existence, and the various personal and social contexts in which we approach the text.

We will have two moments to work with this text from Genesis. First, at this celebratory time, and then tomorrow, during the Bible study.

At this time we will focus on a doorway, two important places, and three messages in the text:

The lock and key to enter the text: Let us enter slowly, in silence, and listen to the wisdom of those who speak in the text. The text dates back to the exile in Babylon. Behind such beautiful poetry, there are exiled people, people who have been deported, uprooted, far away from their land, their people, their culture and their religion. This is a well-known reality for many of those of you who are here today. They are people living in exile (Ezekiel 3.15), by the rivers (Psalms 137.1); they are called servants (Isaiah 42.1); peoples that have been massacred by Babylonian imperialism. In a context where the god of the Empire justifies slavery, it was important to recover and state the following: “our God is the creator of everything,” and that same God transforms chaos of oppression in a beautiful, inhabitable world, in a household that human beings inhabit.

Reminders: The questions and the standpoints from which we approach this text-

- We approach the text of the world’s creation **amid the environmental crisis, the climate crisis**, and global warming. We stick our hands in a filthy world, filled with lots of waste, a world in a state of destruction. A creation that moans and groans: polluted water, contaminated land, appropriated in the hands of a few people who ruthlessly exploit it.

- We approach the text **from our own bodies**, the bodies of women of faith, who come together from all over the world to pray and be strengthened to transform. Let us not let

the text slip through our fingers, our lives. Let us let it sift through our bodies, our everyday experiences, our concerns, and into the joy, the happiness, and the hope that wakes us every morning. As women readers of the text, we want to be challenged about our responsibilities, and also about the role we have played in the created world –too often relegated to a role of aids and rescuers from the disasters caused by the patriarchy (the transforming strength of women).

The text inspires us:

1- God’s creation is good – “And God saw that it was good.”

(Let us repeat [this] with our sisters from Suriname), and now in our own language.

The hermeneutical perspective that runs through the text is [that of] hope. Hope proclaimed, affirmed, and experienced amid pain, the denial of life, and chaos. The beginning of creation is not evil or sin; creation is good. All beings created by God are good. Let us think and feel for a brief moment the prophetic and transforming strength in this statement: “[All] creation is good”. The goodness of creation as a whole and of human beings as a part of creation is one of the major contributions of the Jewish-Christian tradition. We get lost in a world of sin, prohibition and guilt, and we forget the beginning of goodness in creation. We as women, we are part of the goodness in creation. In every people, every culture, every religion, this goodness is manifested in colors, flavors, movements, customs, religions, cultures, stories; the diversity represented here is part of the goodness and the beauty of creation. Everything is so good that it does not seem real. And some religions, and even some churches, create (make up) a threatening god that we fear, that controls our lives and prevents us from enjoying the grace and goodness of creation.

“And God saw that it was good.” Like our brothers and sisters in exile in Babylon, we also affirm the goodness of creation amid evil, environmental destruction, and social injustice. We affirm [its] goodness as a word of hope, a prophetic word that poses a challenge; goodness we need to recover through our prophetic and transforming action.

2. There was chaos, confusion and darkness, and “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters”

The chaos from the beginning connects us with the situation of injustice, exploitation, and deportation suffered by the people of Israel in Babylon. In the fashion of a poem that is almost like a song, the text leads us through each day during creation. But let us go back to chaos, to the chaos from the beginning, which is also our constant company in daily life. Environmental disorder, the degradation that turns the earth and the water into commodities owned by small groups that expel peasants, indigenous populations, and ancestral communities from their lands and jeopardize food security, uprooting [local] cultures and religions. Conflicts on the border that create the term “refugees”, refugees in a land that belongs to everyone, that prevents a large group of women, men, and children from becoming citizens of the world. Chaos - disorder in the injustices of not acknowledging the basic, minimum rights of workers. The unstoppable advances of

capital, which touches the bodies of girls, women, and young people who are the victims of different forms of violence and are subject to human trafficking and profiteering.

And a breath of God, the 'ruah', the 'giant-mother-bird', fluttered her wings and hovered over chaos. The spirit of God, the 'ruah', is feminine; chaos is transformed by the stimulating breath of the Divinity. It is the She-Spirit that transforms chaos, that invigorates, that from chaos gives life to creation, or a new creation. This same Spirit is the one that sustains the created world.

The experience of creation is something we can very easily relate to our bodies, to our lives as women. It is an experience that is not limited to those who have chosen motherhood. Creating, and being creators, has to do with our hands, with our common responsibility in the sustainability of the created world. The invisibility of women's work in patriarchal society demands that every woman assume her role as participant in the creating work of God, as possessor of the spirit, of the 'giant-mother-bird' that flutters over and goes into the deepest of the chaotic history we are living through, and from there it is capable of transforming it in a place of life, recovering the goodness of the created universe. This is how we recover our lives, in our communities of faith and love, in the lives of other women who have lost the joy of living with dignity and passion. This is where we recover the sovereignty of the breath of God that continues to create and keep us in its "unruly" and serene spirit.

3. Our accountability and involvement: conviviality as a path of wisdom to care for creation

The third lesson to be learned from the Genesis text is the call to be accountable, to assume our involvement as we seek to care for creation.

The hegemonic version of modernity leads us to breaking with a more holistic, comprehensive thought that relates us with the universe, the cosmos. An individualistic thought has been imposed, so dominant that it prevents any other understanding of life and the universe. This individualistic thought is also imposed on our relationship with God. We are made in God's image and likeness, and we are part of the universe, but our individualistic thought has drawn us apart from the rest of the created beings and also from God by affirming the existence of a God that is outside and above us, and not the God that we bring along and all human beings bring along (we will look deeper into this tomorrow). An individualistic faith, that seeks personal salvation, is not enough. We are being challenged to rediscover meaning in life and meaning in our Christian faith based on a new understanding of our role as women and part of creation, and based on new images of God. Prayer, which is part of the principles of those of us present here, means listening to God through our neighbor and through the moans and groans of nature. It also means being part of the caring hands of the God who continues to create, from chaos, as Spirit that unsettles and transforms. Our relationship with the created world is a deep and intimate connection; it is one of partnership and interdependence. As we will see tomorrow, an anthropocentric and androcentric reading of Genesis has prevented us from feeling part of the creatures together with the creatures. We are being called to care for

and are cared for by the rest of the created beings. Human arrogance mistook stewardship for domination. And the dominion-depredation attitude in the man-nature relationship is what we find in colonialisms and neocolonialism's that expropriate lands and concentrate it in the hands of a few dominant groups; it is in the sexism that abuses the lives of women and girls. We will find it in other different forms of domination that have been interjected, and even reproduced among us, women.

This is the invitation for today: to recover our original creational relationship, our connection and interdependence with [all] created beings, our communion with the Divinity that inhabits us, of whom we are made in image and likeness; the Divinity that inhabits the other beings, born of the Divinity's word.

Our commitment and expressions of faith are as a community. We embrace the care for creation as part of our Jewish-Christian faith tradition. The environmental situation poses a challenge for us. From the environmental point of view, we cannot be saved in isolation; either all of us are saved together or together we will perish. The exiled, the migrants, the peasants deprived of their land find in us a role of commitment and solidarity.

Let care and love be part of our involvement and accountability in the search for new paths of conviviality.

Bible Study – Genesis 1

Seeking Wisdom to Care for God's Creation

In this morning study, we will continue with our reflection during worship. We will delve deeper into some aspects mentioned yesterday and some other that come up from that same reflection.

Genesis 1 is in the literary form of a poem and employs repetition as a way of communicating a world order desired by God. Repetition is also the structure that holds all things together, each [blessing] linked to another. In this order we find that the world is good, that [all] creation is good. We can rest in the arms of a reliable world, the fruit of its creator's desire, a home that has been lovingly prepared for each one of its creatures. It is a world populated by diverse beings. Diversity can be one of the most beautiful and attractive characteristics of creation - a world of diversity where different beings can respectfully and amicably coexist. It is order arising out of the diversity of all created beings. We can believe in this order, in this meaning of creation, and rely upon it.

Let us experience for a moment this connection among ourselves and with the rest of the created beings.

Exercise #1: Give and receive energy through our hands.

Let us not detach ourselves from the entryway to the text. The background to the text, the exile, the migrant's situation away from his/her land. Being away from our land. Let us contemplate our present reality that we heard about yesterday, the current state of affairs, contamination, hoarding, and destruction of the earth.

About the way of speaking: Let's go back to the form. Through its verses, the text brings us hope again, hope in a new land, where it is possible to live together in respect, equality and harmony, embracing the differences among the different.

[The text] uses poetry to warm our hearts and move us to action, as Milton Schwantes, Brazilian Bible scholar, puts it. The texts were written in times when the people's existence and possession of the land were being questioned, that is, during the exile in Babylon. We cannot read this text without bearing in mind the land, its fruit, the peoples relationship to it, and any conflict around it.

We will look deeper into some aspects of the text, and upon doing so, we will be driven by our aim to seek the wisdom that will lead us to new ways of caring, of solidarity, and coexistence.

1. Faith in a creator God and the word that creates

Genesis 1 must be approached within the context of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. In Genesis 1, creation is a Divine initiative; it is not the result of fighting or punishment. Creating is putting an end to chaos, to disorder/injustice situations, as we discussed yesterday.

It is important to look at this insistence on the goodness of creation as part of the cry of the poor for justice, for a life with dignity for themselves and for nature. In seeking to take on our responsibility, it is important for us to listen to the words of the victims. They carry a kind of wisdom that is a prophetic cry, because they themselves are a cry that condemns the forms of oppression and injustice. At the same time, they affirm, without a doubt, that another world is possible.

For the people exiled in Babylon and those impoverished that stayed in the land, faith in the creator God opens paths of life and hope. The saddest thing that can happen to a group of people is having lost hope, or their hope failing to move them to action, to transformation. If this is the case, faith is nothing but deceit, a sort of opium that keeps our conscience numb, our mouth shut, and our hands tied. But that is not what happens in the Biblical experience. The creator God gives us, women, created in God's image and likeness, the role of co-creators, in charge of taking history in our hands and creating, and re-creating. This means that the future is open, that the neoliberal market's utilitarian vision on nature, the land, and the rivers does not have the last word. The future is open.

In verse 3, when the light and the darkness are separated, new dimensions of space and time are opened that enable the development of the act of creation during the following days, in a period of 6, and finally 7 days, which the author highlights for reasons we will look at further on.

Our creator God reminds us that we are all God's creatures, in a horizontal and reciprocal relationship.

The created world precedes human beings and we should receive it as a gift. We are called to have a receptive attitude, to know how to receive from other creatures.

The creation through the word shows creation as an act of freedom, of dialogic nature. The word is the creator. The creator God acts by the force of God's word. We, women, created in God's image and likeness, take part in the creational ministry and are called to be transformed by the force of our word.

Exercise #2: Our source - words that create words that reinvigorate

(We are a well, a fountain, and the headwaters of a river)

2. In God's image and likeness

Men and women are created in God's image and likeness. What does it mean to be created in God's image and likeness? (Discuss problems of interpretation that get different texts mixed up). We are stewards of the created world and called to a life of interrelation and care for the rest of the created beings, in the same way they care for us. In God's image and likeness or tyrannical lords? There is no traditional division of roles where "be[ing] fruitful and multiplying" is [a task] assigned to women and subduing and ruling over the earth—with all the ideological load that this has entailed—is a male function. These verses have been approached in the context of conquest, colonization and capitalist interests, even though other systems have also been unable to overcome this ideologized

vision of the masculine and the feminine and its link to domination. The use of this text in Western industrial society has been driven by economic interests and a major desire for power.

For exiles, becoming a great and strong people by growing and multiplying their descendants might be a form of resistance. Today, we need to find new approaches that are connected to our everyday experience and may grant these words a new meaning.

The text calls us to rebuild our everyday life, to re-imagine the life of the clan, the community. The entire verse refers to the collective, “let us make,” “man and woman.”

We are God’s image, as women, as men, and in our relationships. And, as God’s image, we cannot be complicit to subjection and domination of men over women. Are we, women, truly convinced that we are “God’s image”?

‘Man and woman’ does not imply an individualistic vision, but again refers to the collective.

The entire clan, the whole *oikos*, the common household is God’s image. Humankind is integrated to the environment, in solidarity among people and animals –they are such close friends that they were created on the same day.

3. Images of God gleaned from the text

God creates with freedom and calls us to freedom – When the people affirm creation as the work of their God, the God of the exiles, the deported, they are also affirming they do not believe in Marduk, the god of the Babylonian empire, and that it does not have the last word. In the Babylonian empire, stars were divinities; they were worshipped. The main sanctuary was devoted to the sun. [These were] divine symbols: the gods of light: the sun, the moon, and the stars. Our text introduces the creation of lights in the beginning (on the first and fourth day).

Humankind was not created to be enslaved by the gods, and God’s name shall not be used to subjugate and enslave other peoples, like it happened in Babylon and, sadly, repeatedly in the history of Christianity in Latin America and other continents. The goal of creation is God’s image, which is transmitted from generation to generation, to live together amicably. The dynamic nature of human freedom is paramount, and it is presented in an original manner in this ancient story.

The God of life and the care for life: the danger of idolatry – The text strengthens our commitment toward an economy that values life over profit. The earth and the creatures that inhabit the created world are not the property of anybody. The God that we find in the text manifests himself/herself against the systems of domination. That is why serving that God is incompatible with serving the market, the patriarchy as a system of domination, and the interests of racist societies; all this is idolatry. One more aspect of the caregiving God: it is important to be aware of the immediate relationship that is established between care and women. Caring is a Divine mandate for men and women.

We need to reframe associations that have been established during our whole lives and that some attempt to justify with their interpretation of certain Bible texts.

4. A day of rest – We are free – God is freedom – reject fundamentalism

Genesis 1 is a way into the conversations, feelings and desires of our exiled brothers and sisters. Somehow, this might have been one of their topics of conversation or a strategy for their struggles for freedom. That is how we get to the day of rest, and this includes women's right to rest.

The work of creation was done in six days, and on the seventh day God finished the work, rested and made it holy. It was very important for that group of people to recover their culture, their religious traditions, and their relationship with time. We know from the history of black slavery, and other systems of domination, that the colonization of time is a form of robbing the people of their memory, of preventing them from maintaining their roots. After that appropriation, all other dimensions of life are dominated. For this reason, it was very important for this community of exiles to recover their time, to recover the seventh day as a resting day, a holy day. This is an issue that must run through our bodies, as women. Our relationship with time, with resting, with opening our lives to that space of nothingness, of resting that allows us to even think differently, a break from our routine to re-create ourselves. When was the last time you rested? How did you feel? Because, sometimes we even feel guilty about it.

Resting goes against rhythm, against the rhythm of exploitation. Resting is breaking free from slavery. Resting calls upon memory; singing and psalms come up in these circumstances (Psalms 98, 137; Isaiah 42.10-13). It is an important time to recover the memory of peoples, of families. Resting is for everyone. In other texts from the Old Testament, we can find the importance of rest for the earth and the animals, in addition to human rest.

Therefore, the Sabbath is a special day set aside for resistance, for organizing hope, a means of liberation.

Exercise #3: We engage in the experience of resting, of believing and resting in the goodness of creation. We surrender, feel and trust one another, relax.

5. Wisdom and hope – New words about such ancient issues

To conclude this introduction to the study of the text, in Genesis 1: 2, 4 we see a text that, reflecting on creation, helps us to organize our hope. Being a mythical story, it offers a wide range of interpretation. Our suggestion to you in this couple of days is an invitation to be conscious of our interconnection with the rest of the created beings, contemplate our status as creatures and enjoy it, and live in our hope in life's concreteness amid historical conflict, knowing that there is no hope without solidarity. And the wisdom we gain from this text reinforces the invitation to assume our accountability and joy in rebuilding our common home.

Exercise #4: Leaving our home, looking for someone who speaks a different language or, that for any external sign we perceive as different to us, and approaching her to express our love and thankfulness for sharing this space.

Exercise #5: Wisdom in conversation – group work:

- Words of wisdom for the care of creation:
What aspect in the text can I relate with the most? What would I like to gain from the text?
- Prophecy for transformation:
From social and environmental standpoints, what challenges and what hopes does the text present us with?
- Feeling and reflecting on the text as women, what do I like (in the text)? What do I dislike? What do I need?

Exercise #6: A universal and cosmic embrace

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