



From the Pulpit: November 26, 2023

Second Sunday of Extended Lent—Pledge Dedication Sunday

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Colossians 1:15–20

The New O Antiphons, II: *O Lord, who thought up kangaroos and cacti...*

*O Lord who thought up kangaroos and cacti,
and threw the stars like snowballs into space,
who dashed the Milky Way across the heavens
like a child in love with finger paint,
lift our busy eyes from all distractions
that we might see the beauty you have made.
Help us to awaken and awaken.*

The scripture lesson this morning comes from *The Letter to the Colossians* chapter one.

Jesus 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—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

Vancouver poet Diane Tucker's *Forty New O Antiphons* are all seven-line prayers addressed to Jesus, the one who came down to Bethlehem so long ago and is coming again.

All Forty New O Antiphons begin with a clever, descriptive address to Jesus which helps us to think in new ways about who he is and what he does ("O Lord Who Thought up Kangaroos and Cacti"). Each one begins with a clever description, and then concludes with an earnest plea for Jesus to do something for us which will make our lives fuller, richer, and deeper ("Lift our busy eyes from all distractions"). Each prayer concludes with a bold imperative: "Jesus! Listen up! Pay attention! This is important! Wake us up! Please!"

"O Lord Who Thought up Kangaroos and Cacti." Why Kangaroos and Cacti? Why marsupials and succulents? Well maybe because they alliterate. Maybe Diane Tucker is like me: she loves alliteration.

Or maybe it's because kangaroos and cacti are such improbable, unexpected, and eccentric children of that shrewd improviser called Evolution. Who ever saw them coming in the long, meandering history of natural selection?

Did you know that most kangaroos are left-handed? 95%. They can leap 35 feet forward in a single hop and six feet straight up and they can move at 35 mph. But only going forward. Their tails are so massive that they can't walk backwards. That's why there's a kangaroo on Australia's coat of arms. "Advance Australia." Never go backwards. Be like the kangaroo.

Do you know what collective noun describes a group of kangaroos? A Mob. It's a mob of kangaroos, maybe because they can punch harder than mafiosos.

Cacti can grow up to 75 feet high. They can live for 200 years. They can go two years without water. They've been around for 100 million years, as old as the dinosaurs, but only the cacti survived the asteroid impact in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Well why are we talking about kangaroos and cacti while we prepare to celebrate the birth of that Bethlehem infant? That's a good question. I'm glad you asked and I'll tell you in a minute. When I think about the vast panoply of living things that cover up literally every square inch of soil and sea on this planet, I am perpetually astonished at God's fecund imagination. God throws every color, shape, texture, and arrangement against the canvas of creation to see what might happen.

Nobody knows how many species of living things are on this planet. We've catalogued about two million, but we have at least seven million we haven't classified yet, and some estimates go up to 100 million species.

Don't you think that even God was surprised when after several billion years of evolution a sarcastic fringehead showed up on the ocean floor? I did not make this up. This is a real species—a sarcastic fringehead. God tries everything—protozoa, plankton, porpoises, peonies, ponderosa pines, panthers, pelicans, porcupines, and Presbyterians.

I read the most wonderful article this week by Kimberley C. Patton. Dr. Patton teaches Classics and Theology at Harvard University.¹ It might be the most accomplished and interesting theological article I've ever read, about God's loving, intimate relationship to the animals on this planet.

¹Kimberley C. Patton, "He Who Sits in the Heavens Laughs: Recovering Animal Theology in the Abrahamic Traditions," *Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 93, Part 04, 2000, p. 430.

She introduced me to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite from the sixth century. I love that name. My neurons fire up every time I say Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, so I say it every chance I get. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite is a pen name; we don't know his real name. I call him The Crafty Theologian with the Twelve-Cylinder Name.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite said in the sixth century that in every creature, from dragonfly to behemoth, something of God's inexhaustible nature is revealed, *something that would not be revealed if that creature did not exist*. At creation, God's overflowing nature spills out of its bounds and out into every creature.

“Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite said in the sixth century that in every creature, from dragonfly to behemoth, something of God's inexhaustible nature is revealed, something that would not be revealed if that creature did not exist. At creation, God's overflowing nature spills out of its bounds and out into every creature.”

Every living creature tells us something unique about God, so that in man and woman, for example, we see God's very face and God's vast intelligence; in the smiling chimpanzee we see something of God's smirking sense of humor; in the wolverine we see something of God's startling ferocity; and in the weasel something of God's craftiness; and in my golden retriever something of God's unwavering faithfulness; and in the swan something not only of God's inexpressible loveliness but also of God's jealous protectiveness; and in the diving monsters of the deep like the octopus something of God's twisted imagination; and even in bacteria something of God's irrepressible urge to spread and grow and fill the earth. And we can't do without even a single one. Without them all, creation is impoverished, and we know less about God.

O Lord who thought up kangaroos and cacti, and threw stars like snowballs into space. There are one septillion stars in the universe. That's a one followed by 24 zeroes. A septillion snowballs.

Stars are born in swirls of gas and dust called nebulae. When these clouds of gas and dust begin to spin in the same direction, the dust congeals and—voila!—a star is born! Astrophysicists call nebulae “the nurseries of the stars.” Someone said that a nebula is a manger where God lays her baby stars.

These nebulae are called The Pillars of Creation. The pillar on the left is four light years tall. The Pillars of Creation are 7,000 light years from earth, which means that we are not seeing them as they are today, but as they were 7,000 years ago, when human beings were hunter-gatherers in the Stone Age.

In fact, the Pillars of Creation no longer exist. They were destroyed by a supernova 6,000 years ago. In a thousand years, through the successors to the Webb Space Telescope, we’ll be able to watch them collapse and disintegrate and disperse as the supernova explodes in their neighborhood.

The phrase “Pillars of Creation” comes from an 1857 sermon by London preacher Charles Spurgeon. Can you believe that? A sermon inspired the scientists who launched the Hubble and Webb Telescopes into space.

The Reverend Spurgeon was preaching about Christmas, about the One who came to Bethlehem. He said, “And now wonder, ye angels,” Spurgeon says of the birth of Christ, “the Infinite has become an infant; he, upon whose shoulders the universe doth hang, hangs at his mother’s breast; He who created all things, and bears up the pillars of creation, hath now become so weak, that He must be carried by his own mother.”

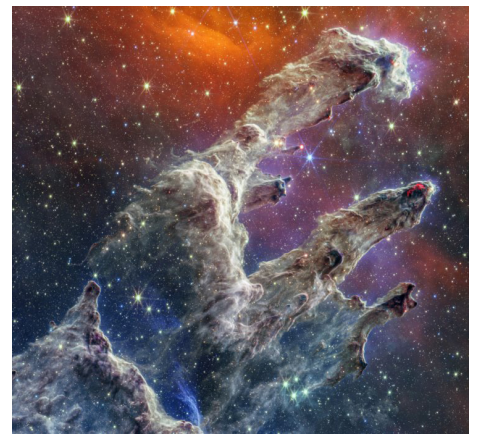
Dr. Spurgeon was preaching that text from Colossians I read a minute ago: “Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...all things have been created through him and for him.”

Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. All of it is **from** him and **through** him and **for** him. All of it. Kangaroos and cacti, stars like snowballs in the night sky, the sarcastic fringehead.

The One who bears the pillars of creation on his shoulders comes down quietly, inconspicuously, modestly, to an unwed teenage mother, to a barn in a tiny village at the fringe of the Roman Empire.

It’s all **from** him and **through** him and **for** him. And that’s why we think about kangaroos and cacti and stars like snowballs in the night sky as we prepare to celebrate his birth.

“Or maybe it’s because kangaroos and cacti are such improbable, unexpected, and eccentric children of that shrewd improviser called Evolution. Who ever saw them coming in the long, meandering history of natural selection?”



—Prayers of the People—
Sarah Champlin

Good and gracious God who gives us the breath in our lungs,
We thank you for the miraculous gift of life.
Heaven and earth are truly full of your glory.
The birds of the air and the fish of the sea sing the song of your creation.
Lord, teach us to listen so that we might hear your melody in every whistle of the wind.

Lord, teach us to listen also to the cries of the anguished.
Near and far, the weight of the world's suffering is enough to bring us to our knees.
We pray to you, O God:
Bring peace to those facing unthinkable violence in the Holy Land, in Ukraine, and all over the world.
Wrap those who are mourning in your tender care.
Help us remember that there is no such thing as other people's children;
we belong to each other just as surely as we belong to you.

Holy God, we adore you.
The holiday season brings us new opportunities each day to rejoice in your presence in our lives.
We recognize you in the faces of our families, in the lights that line the homes in our neighborhoods, in the smell of pine trees, in the songs of the season.
Joyful One, we thank you for the everyday miracles you are working in our lives.
Yet for some of us, being surrounded by Christmas cheer makes the hurts of our hearts stand in bitter contrast.
God, Be especially with those of us who are struggling to find joy.
Bring comfort and healing to those who are ill.
Bring solace to the lonely hearts in our midst.

God of relentless hope, we praise you.
You make a way out of no way.
In this season of waiting, we remember that you love us so much you came to be with us on Earth.
We anticipate your arrival with deep gladness and hopeful hearts.
Come, Lord Jesus, may your light come into our world.

Our Father.... Amen.

**You may use these prayers for non-commercial purposes in any medium, provided you include a brief credit line with the author's name (if applicable) and a link to the original post.*

KENILWORTH UNION CHURCH
211 Kenilworth Avenue, Kenilworth Illinois 60043
847-251-4272 | kuc.org
facebook.com/kenilworthunionchurch