

Whenever I hear readings about the goodness of creation, particularly in the creation stories, I am met with a number of mixed emotions. My initial reaction to this beautiful Genesis passage is usually one of nostalgic appreciation. "Oh how wonderful!" It's as if I'm gawking at an enchanting but ultimately out-of-touch fairytale. My feeling of wonder is quickly slashed by the arrival of, well, reality. I am reminded of the beauty of our world, but even more poignantly I am reminded of how far this world feels from the paradise of God's original creation. As I think of the current state of the created world, I'm frankly overwhelmed by the scope of our environmental crisis, by the rapid rates of species extinction, by the shrinking of our glaciers and the rising of our seas. All of these elements contribute to a thick sense of urgency that seems to constantly loom in our polluted air. The more I read the news, the more this urgency bears down on me, and the more I feel the need to jump into action. But the irony of this is that, being constantly surrounded by news of our demise is exhausting. So while global crises are likely to push us to desire and work for reform and justice, I find that I am experiencing them from a place of strung-out, depleted, and breathless urgency before I've barely begun.

Now, there is no denying that the state of our planet requires our immediate attention. However, the readings today offer us a different perspective on how to continue cultivating our appreciation of and care for the created world.

Let's look at how God does it in the Genesis reading:

"Then God said,

"Let there be light," and there was light.

God saw how good the light was.

God then separated the light from the darkness.

God saw how good it was.

Evening came, and morning followed—the fourth day.

Then God said,

"Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures,

and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky." etc.

Strangely enough, the word that stands out to me here is, “then.” “Then” is a word that indicates pause. And this pause is taken by God between each day of creation, as evening comes.

This is a sacred pause. In this pause, God stops God’s work, and takes a moment to declare the elements of creation “good.” Often I want to jump right into action, but God pauses and takes the time to carefully notice the particular goodness.

In graduate school, one of my professors of moral theology made the wise claim that “all moral action is a response in gratitude.” Perhaps what is allowed to enter in the space of a sacred pause is this sense of gratitude, this awe.

A poem by Robert Hass offers an example of what this sacred and slow noticing might look like:

This morning a cat—bright orange—pawing at the one patch of new grass in the sand-
and tanbark-colored leaves.

And last night the sapphire of the raccoon's eyes in the beam of the flashlight.

He was climbing a tree beside the house, trying to get onto the porch, I think, for a wad
of oatmeal

Simmered in cider from the bottom of the pan we'd left out for the birds.

And earlier a burnished, somewhat dazed woodchuck, his coat gleaming with spring,

Loping toward his burrow in the roots of a tree among the drying winter's litter

Of old leaves on the floor of the woods, when I went out to get the *New York Times*.

Something happens in this pause, both in the Genesis creation stories and in Hass’ poem. The one encountering creation looks slowly, openly at the particular forms of life before them. Attention is directed fully toward the wonderful particularities of the light of the sun, or the loping of a woodchuck. And in the Gospel, Jesus offers a very particular metaphor in the mustard seed. It seems that there is some wisdom in giving attention to the seemingly minute details of creation.

Hildegard of Bingen created a term - viriditas - to refer to the vitality of creation. Viriditas is sometimes translated as “greening power.” It suggests a vibrant sense of aliveness. It seems to me that when we take the slow, sacred pause to declare the tiny particularities of nature “good,” this viriditas is what blossoms. In the space of the sacred pause, the invigorating, enlivening power of the Spirit flourishes within us. Perhaps this power is the force behind God’s creative work the following day. And perhaps the power of the sacred pause is the fuel for sustainable moral action.

The sacred pause allows us to work from a place of fullness, of deep-rootedness in the wisdom of creation. Like the development of the mustard seed, this work is slow, patient, and enduring. It endures because it is alive, vital; this is sustainable work.

With the sacred pause and the invigoration it brings, the vitality of Hildegard’s viriditas becomes beautifully entangled with the “obligation” spoken about in the Gospel reading. The tension between urgent duty and sacred pause becomes less of a tension and more of a sequence of events. When we invite the sacred pause which is required for renewal, viriditas rejuvenates and enlivens us, propelling us forward with both peace and purpose to attend to the needs of our world and our earth, to do “what we are obliged to do.”

Where the scope of our ecological crisis usually exhausts, the slow and sacred pause for the entry of viriditas, delivered to us through the wonderful particularities of creation, invigorates duty with the fire of the Spirit. Ultimately, God’s pause in the creation stories suggests that moral action for the protection of our planet is about the willingness to take the time to truly notice and fall in love with the playful particularities of the created world. The first step of all moral action must be the turning of our hearts and our visions such that viriditas may enter.

As we celebrate the final official Sunday of the season of creation, we must bring with us the proverbial tools to sustain us in our work for our earth throughout the rest of the

seasons. So, I am a high school theology teacher, and every weekend I give my students “spiritual homework.” Now I know this is not what you signed up for, but here is your spiritual homework: fall and re-fall in love with the particularities of the created world. Don’t consider this time frivolous, but a moral necessity. Spend a half hour gazing at and noticing the pattern of a fallen leaf, or the scampering of the squirrels through a tree’s branches. Allow the time for sacred pause, open yourself to allow viriditas to enter. And allow this pause, this encounter, to fuel your never-ending but grace-filled action “to do what we are obliged to do.”