

DOES GOD CONTROL THE WEATHER?

East Plains, Sept. 9, 2018.

Job 12: 7-10; Psalm 19; Matt 5:43-48; Matt 16: 1-4.

Does God control the weather?

You can guess what I'm going to say. The short answer is No.

I told a friend of mine that I was going to preach on this topic. He said, "Well, if God controls the weather, he's doing a pretty poor job of it."

Which reminds me of a farmer I knew many years ago out west. The farmers in Saskatchewan were very short of rain that year. The farmer said he was praying for rain. Finally the rain came, but far too much of it. His crops were swamped, and all his chickens were drowned.

Par for the course. The weather does not appear to be well organized by someone who is wise, benevolent and all powerful.

If we want to check on the weather coming up, we turn on the weather channel, right?

The meteorologists will tell us, with a reasonable degree of accuracy, what the weather will be like for the next few days.

Because we know that what determines the weather is the interaction of warm and cold air currents, the dynamics of heat and wind and water and land, all interacting in complex ways.

The meteorologists' job is to gather data and sort it all out, and make predictions.

So you know that, if you're hit with a hurricane or a flood, or a lovely warm sunny day, it's not because Somebody up there is pulling supernatural strings.

I raise this question: "Does God control the weather?" as a way in to the larger, deeper question of how the Creator relates to the creation, and to us, God's creatures.

Supposing that we believe in God the Creator: How are we to imagine God's presence and activity in the world?

I think there are two main points to be made: first, God the Creator is Sovereign, the Source of all power, the beginning and end of all things.

In that sense, God is ultimately in control of everything.

However, God is also limited, or should I say, self-limiting. Evidently, God does not micro-manage the universe, including the weather.

To get a clue as to how God relates to creation, we need to bring together our biblical sources of faith, with what we know from science and our general experience of life.

First, let's consider the question of the sovereignty of God.

In the Bible God the Creator is constantly spoken of as the Almighty, the Source of all power and life.

This belief is expressed in many biblical texts, including those we've heard this morning from the Hebrew scriptures: Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the dome of the sky proclaims God's handiwork."

As the psalm says, the creation, in all its order and beauty, cries out to us a message from its Creator. The stars and the planets, the trees and the flowers, intelligent animals, and beautiful human beings, all shout out to us:

We are the work of a mighty and intelligent Mind, awesome in greatness and glory.

The wonderful poetry of the book of Job says it well:

"Ask the beasts and they will teach you; the birds of the air and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

"Who among these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of every human being."

This and other texts declare that God created not only in the beginning, but the Creator Spirit continues to be the energizing, life-giving Source of all things. As we read in one of the Psalms: "When you send forth your Spirit, they are created."

God's creative work is ongoing. Or, as our creed says, "God has created, and is creating."

The divine Spirit, as we said last week, is like the wind, invisible but powerful, uncontained and uncontainable. As the Biblical authors see it, the Spirit of God is not only beyond us, but also lives within and interpenetrates the whole creation, breathing order and novelty into all things.

So we need to imagine the divine Spirit working within the remarkable creative and healing processes of creation.

Recall for a moment the Genesis texts about creation. As you know, they are to be taken not as factual accounts of exactly what happened. We read them as inspired poetry, a profound source of insight.

There the Creator is clearly sovereign. Creation only exists at the Creator's initiative. Creatures do not ask to be created, and their nature as creatures is given.

That's why we have traditionally addressed God as "Almighty," "omnipotent," all powerful.

But does the sovereignty of God mean that God controls everything? I think not.

I guess it was natural for pre-modern people to think of God as all-controlling. They knew very little about natural laws, such as the natural explanations for the weather.

It has been common for people to think that, not only the weather, but everything that happens, is God's will.

Some people still feel this way. Whatever happens, even dreadful things, they will say: "It was God's will."

For some folks, this is a consoling thought, and has no doubt comforted many people.

The idea is there in the book of Job.

In that story, Job's adult children are enjoying food and drink in the eldest brother's house, and a great wind roared across the desert, the house fell upon the young people, and they were all killed.

Hearing this terrible news, Job responds: "The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." The assumption was, if it happened, it must have been God's will.

I think most of us do not think that way today. We don't agree with the insurance companies that natural disasters are "acts of God."

Or, at a more trivial level: I recall that when I was a boy in Sunday School, up at Mt. Hamilton Church, the superintendent announced one day that there would be a Sunday School picnic the second Sunday of June. We will all get on that big boat, the Hamiltonian, and – God willing – the picnic will be held down at LaSalle Park.

In other words, we can enjoy the outdoors if God decides to give us a nice day for the picnic. Otherwise, then, God willing, we will hold the picnic in the church basement.

That man, apparently, believed that God directly controlled the weather.

Now it's very difficult today for most of us to think that way. Even if we're not meteorologists, we know, more or less, what accounts for a rainy day, or a beautiful sunny day. We need no supernatural explanation.

Even if we're not scientists, we all possess a scientific mentality. That pertains also to our whole, understanding of the origins of the universe and the evolution of the planet Earth.

The ancient biblical authors, of course, knew nothing of evolutionary science.

But today we have a new cosmic story deriving from the sciences of biology, geology, astronomy. Especially since the development of the Hubble telescope around 1920, astronomers discovered that we actually have an expanding universe.

It seems to be the consensus of these sciences that the universe of time and space, as we know it, actually did have a beginning. The universe is not eternal, it was not always here. It started somewhere, and will end somewhere.

They calculate it had its beginning about 14 billion years ago, with what they call the "Big Bang," an indescribable cosmic explosion.

Telescopic evidence tells us that the explosion is still going on, as the physical universe continues to expand outwards, and we have evidence now of billions, not only of planets and stars, but of solar systems and galaxies! Absolutely mind boggling!

But nothing is more astounding than the evolutionary process on our own little planet Earth. I suggest that, with the eyes of faith, we can see the divine Spirit at work within the evolutionary process.

Biological life seems to have begun very small, with a single living cell, which then divided, and eventually, over a very long period of time, developed into a living organism.

Very simple biological organisms then gradually developed over millions of years into complex living creatures of huge variety.

Consider the cell, the most basic biological building block of life. Our bodies are made up of billions of them. Each cell is a carefully crafted, immensely complex system of molecules, fed by similarly complex proteins.

We are told that, even the slightest variation in the structure of these microscopic cells and molecules would render all life impossible.

Certain things had to be exactly right for us to exist as living creatures.

And consider the order and predictability of nature, the so-called laws of the universe.

Consider that all the laws of nature were implicit within that one great explosive beginning, all the laws of physics and chemistry, including the perfect symmetries and proportions of oxygen and carbon, and all the other elements, that were necessary for the evolution of living matter.

So that original Big Bang was pregnant even with our amazing humanity, which eventually appeared out of that evolutionary process –

our rational thought, our spiritual nature, our science and technology, our architecture, our music and poetry, our sense of justice, our capacity for love, all of these were potentially there from that remarkable beginning.

It fills me with wonder. It is unbelievable to me that our conscious intelligent minds developed accidentally, from a totally mindless source. Can mind evolve out of total mindlessness? By pure accident?

It took a few billion years to evolve from the first bacteria or amoeba, through many evolutionary experiments, detours and dead ends, through many mammal ancestors, to reach our rational, spiritual humanity.

And perhaps the evolutionary process is not finished yet.

Why did it take so long? Well, a few billion years is nothing to the eternal God. Remember, “a thousand ages in thy sight, are like an evening gone.”

So that’s the first point: God is sovereign, the mighty originator, the eternal Mind.

God as Spirit, like wind or breath, lives within and interpenetrates all creation, bringing forth order, but also novelty, and ever more beautiful and complex forms of life.

It all speaks of God’s sovereignty, unimaginable intelligence and power.

But this does not imply that God controls everything.

This leads to our second point: God is sovereign, but God is also limited.

In the Bible, God is not depicted only as sovereign and all powerful. God’s will is not always done, either in human affairs, or in nature.

For example, in Genesis 1, we hear that when God creates human beings, God gives them dominion on the earth: “Be fruitful and multiply, and subdue the earth and have dominion.”

In Genesis 2, a different author tells us that God created human beings and commanded them to “cultivate and protect” the Earth.

So, the biblical poets tells us that the Creator has given human beings power, authority, and responsibility in the world. The author is very clear: The Creator does not rule everything directly.

The Creator allows a certain autonomy to creatures, especially human beings, who have the power to think and plan, and to make moral choices.

And in fact we know that we human beings do have enormous power on this planet, for good or for evil.

We also hear, especially from the prophets, and from Jesus, that the Creator wills that human beings will live peacefully, in relationships of love and justice.

But this is not enforced from above.

The Creator does not interfere in a supernatural manner, in human affairs, does not swoop down and reward the righteous, and punish the wicked.

Jesus' comment in Matthew 5 is interesting. He says, "the Father in heaven makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

In other words, God does not control and manipulate the weather to favour some people over others. The favours of the weather are not distributed according to what we deserve or don't deserve.

And we know, both from the Bible, and from experience, that God does not enforce a peaceful and just world.

The Creator does not determine who will win an election, does not decide upon government environmental policies, or tax policies, whether a pipeline will be built, whether a war will be fought.

We might wish that were so, but apparently, in God's wisdom, God respects the autonomy and freedom of human beings.

In the Bible, we hear that the Creator grieves and weeps over the foolish and evil choices made by human beings, but limits himself, restrains herself, allowing the creatures their autonomy.

Not only humans, but the evolutionary process itself: God allows a certain autonomy to all creatures to develop, to adapt, to flourish, and yes, to take wrong directions, to make mistakes, sometimes to perish.

To use a very inadequate analogy: Good parents are not all-controlling of their children's lives. Children need guidance, but eventually, they have to make their own choices, to make their own mistakes.

So also, we see that God is limited - self-limited, I think - about what happens in the world, including the weather. The natural world takes its course, according to its own natural laws.

It's impossible, of course, for us little human beings to imagine what choices God had in creating the universe. We don't know why God did not make everything perfect from the beginning, rather than making a long detour through millions of years of evolution.

Perhaps God grows and learns, and develops, along with creation?

We cannot fathom why the universe is so unbelievably vast and ancient, and why we intelligent, spiritual creatures came to exist only recently on one tiny little planet. (At least as far as we know so far.)

We have no idea what limits God, what choices God had in creating. It's even laughable that we ask the question.

One thing we do know, both from the Bible, and from our general observation of the world: we humans actually do have dominion on the earth.

The evolutionary process has placed human beings in a position of great power.

It seems now, in the modern era, that our 'dominion' has gone to our head. Now it's not so much that God is controlling the weather, but that we are.

We have exercised dominion on the earth with great gusto. But we have been less enthusiastic about cultivating and protecting the earth (as in Genesis 2).

Not that we really have the power or wisdom to successfully produce wonderful weather. We do, however, have the power to mess it up seriously.

Because we are now faced with human-caused climate change.

Jesus told us to be alert to the signs of the times. Know what's going on in the world around you.

I suggest that the signs of the times today are ever increasing forest fires and floods, rising seas, excessive heat, more and more violent weather.

We humans, with our thumb-equipped hands and big brains are so clever, and have amassed so much knowledge and power that we are capable of destroying all life on the planet.

We've known this since the end of World War II, when the first nuclear bombs were exploded over Japan. But now, a more subtle, and more insidious danger has arisen, and again it's the sciences that inform us about this.

The earth and ocean sciences, jointly known as climate science, has been telling us now for decades, with consensus, that we humans are heating up the planet dangerously.

I haven't time to talk about this at length, but basically, we know that, through our industrial civilization, our means of transportation, our systems of heating and cooling, we emit millions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every day.

Since carbon dioxide traps heat, the global average temperature has now increased by more than 1 degree Celsius over pre-industrial levels. At the polar regions the increase is much greater, more like 6 or 7 degrees Celsius.

As a result, the polar regions are melting, glaciers are disappearing, seas are rising from melted ice, weather all over the world is de-stabilized, heat over the oceans is increasing, resulting in more, and stronger hurricanes.

I could go on and on about the science of climate change, but I'll spare you that.

The fact is that humanity has known about this for a long time now, but we have not had the wisdom to make the changes necessary to reverse it.

We need, urgently, to move as swiftly as possible away from coal, oil and natural gas, to shift to renewable sources of energy in a massive way.

We know what to do, but we won't do it.

The point here is that we humans have overdone our dominion on the earth. We are not interested in cultivating and protecting the Earth.

Our hubris, our wish to be our own gods, our pursuit of wealth and comfort, knows no limits, and the result is increasingly disastrous.

This is, at root, a spiritual problem. We have forgotten that we are humble creatures of our Creator. We think we are lords of the earth, and can do anything we like on this planet.

Does God control the weather? No, but we do....

To some extent.

The major changes that are required can only happen through government legislation, and that governments won't do a thing, without the support of people like us.

In the end, it all depends on movements of large numbers of little people like us, who will have to demand the necessary changes.

What is God doing about this? Is God indifferent to what happens on this beautiful planet Earth?

We know, through Christ, that the sovereign God is also the vulnerable God, the self-emptying, self-limiting God, who will not force or domineer solutions upon us.

We know there will be no supernatural solutions enforced from above. No point in praying for the hurricane to go somewhere else.

I began by asking, How does the Creator relate to the world? In what sense does God act into the world?

As we sang in a hymn last week, God acts into the world as “the spirit of gentleness.”

We may believe that the God who loves the world is alive and at work through natural, healing processes, and also through movements of people.

As the Spirit moved through Moses to free the slaves; as the Spirit moved through the prophets who demanded social justice; as the Spirit has moved in the modern world, against slavery, against child labour, against racism,

So also, the Spirit is moving in the environmental movements, yes, through honest scientists who warn us, and technologists and engineers and honest and courageous politicians, who attempt to lead us to practical solutions.

God also moves through little people like us who choose to put our little bit of weight on the right side of history. The question is: Are we with the Spirit?

Our creed says, We are not alone...., We believe in God who... works in us and others through the Spirit.” I close with a prayer, with words from a hymn that we sang last week:

“Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free, Spirit, Spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness, Wind, Wind on the sea.”

Harold Wells.