

Season of Creation 2, 2017
Peace, Seattle
June 18, 2017
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Genesis 1:1-2:3, Psalm 8

ON BEING HUMAN

Last week we were all treated to a dramatic presentation of Microbiota – the trillions of tiny creatures that make up much of our bodies – and all living things.

Today's Creation focus is ...human beings – and our emergence on this planet. Anthropos!

A month ago Eldon and I spent a week attending the 12th Assembly of Lutheran World Federation, occurring this time in Windhoek, Namibia.

800 men, women, and youth from across our planet gathered to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation – and to share visions and priorities for our continuing work of education, service and justice efforts in the coming years. All done with many quotes of Martin Luther – in many languages. My husband Eldon and I were “visitors” – no responsibilities, but able to participate in all aspects of the Assembly except voting with the official delegates.

The Assembly meets every 7 years, in a different region of the Church each time. We had not paid much attention to this level of work of the church until we learned it was to be held in Namibia this year – a place we had become familiar with and had enjoyed two years ago. It was selected for the Assembly site this year of celebrating the Reformation primarily because it had been liberated just 27 years ago from the oppressive yoke of apartheid and a century of colonial control – this liberation accomplished by “God's Grace” and a struggle led by the Lutheran Church in Namibia and faith communities around the world.

On more than one occasion, I looked over the large gathering – made up of all kinds of human beings, all skin colors, varied clothing, many languages. It occurred to me that everyone in this large convention room – or worship space – *had family roots in this continent* – Africa. Thousands of years ago, after tens of thousands of years in Africa, the first *Homo sapiens* ventured on to new continents – to the north and east and eventually to every place that could support human life.

It has been understood for some time that the earliest *Homo sapiens* appeared in East Africa – Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania – about 200,000 years ago. It was a major news event a few weeks ago – when all the media excitedly announced that *Homo sapiens* had recently been found in Morocco – way to the north in Africa – and the remains indicated much earlier communities of *Homo sapiens* – in the area of 300,000 years ago! (Perhaps there will be findings of *Homo sapiens* in other areas of Africa – it's an unending story.)

Rewind several years back to my experience of the [“Genographic Project”](https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/) of the National Geographic Society.¹ After submitting \$50 and a quick swab of my mouth, I was sent a picture of my *deep family history* – and I was traced to “Mitochondrial Eve” – the name given by anthropologists to the mother of us all – 150,000 to 170,000 years ago.

¹ Find out more about the Genographic Project here: <https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/>

“Mitochondrial” refers to DNA through our mothers’ lineage; we can all trace our deep history through our moms, only men can trace both their mothers and their fathers history – because of the Y-chromosome which we women don’t have.

Some of you may have traced your recent genealogy through Ancestry.com – so you can discover you have recent ancestors in Ireland...or Ethiopia. The Genographic Project looks at the very roots of your human history.

My family tree arose in Africa, and branched off through the Mediterranean, Asia, Eastern Europe and then the British Isles. That trip took 50,000 years or so. And it took thousands of my mothers, each surviving to offer the next generation.

I invited our daughter of Native American descent to also participate in the Genographic Project – she was excited to see the results. And it should not have surprised us that her mothers came out of Africa up through Asia, and east to the Bering Land Bridge and down into North America – her branch to the Great Lakes region. She was a Menominee Indian from Northern Wisconsin. But we saw that despite the great divergence of our early ancestors, we were connected in East Africa, originally!

This is stunning news: geneticists and anthropologists now affirm that all of us human beings, all who have ever lived on Earth, can be traced to that one woman who lived maybe 170,000 years ago!

Mitochondrial Eve wasn’t the only woman who lived at that time – and produced offspring – but she was the only *Homo sapien* woman born whose lineage didn’t die out! The progeny of the other women, in other early tribes of humans, all died out – for any number of possible reasons – disease, famine, natural disasters, etc.

“We are all African under the skin,” claims Dr. Spencer Wells, founder of the Genographic Project.

On our southern African sojourn following the Assembly, I enjoyed a frequent survey of the nighttime southern hemisphere sky – it was winter there, dark from 5 pm on! The sky was ablaze – far from interfering city lights. Nothing looked familiar to my northern eyes and I couldn’t locate the Southern Cross. But I did ponder: did Mitochondrial Eve and her daughters – and my thousands of mothers over the millennia – take time from child-bearing, family and tribal demands, just surviving – to look up at the nighttime sky – and respond with awe and wonder?

The same Milky Way we observe today was there for our ancestors. Would there have been any sensing of “Your handwork in the heavens; the moon and the stars set in place”? (Psalm 8) Any questioning of “What is humankind that you remember them, the human race that you care for them? We bipeds walking the earth?” Did they dance and sing to their Creator Spirit? Celebrate “deep space”? We can only wonder! But...that gets us to next week’s focus –“Cosmos.”