

Song of Creation

a sermon based on

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4*a*

and delivered on-

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Trinity Sunday (Year A)

for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Can we go back to the beginning, today? I mean back to that passage that Keith read just a few moments ago. "In the beginning "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." (Gen 1:1-2) In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth... Contemplation of what follows has led to virulent (and sometimes violent) arguments between people about the nature of Nature and how what experience came into being. It's also caused consternation for some Christians as we yield to the authority of Scripture but hear a description of Creation that doesn't quite mesh with modern knowledge.

The story of Creation in Genesis and even the quest to understand existence through the application of scientific method: both speak to the human yearning to understand not only how we came to be, but who we are.

It seems as if each ancient culture had their own creation narrative. Some things they share, with the story we know: many begin with the formlessness of water. They also speak to relationship of humanity to the world and the gods. In each case there are several actors. In the Salinan story it is Bald Eagle. The little water beetle, the Great Buzzard, and Tsiska'gīli' (the Red Crawfish) star in the Cherokee story.¹

If you remember the stories from Greek and Roman mythology that we learned in grammar school, you can recognize the theme. People are merely playthings or puppets for the gods' skirmishes and power struggles with one another.

In the near east, the Babylonian story, Enuma Elish, with origins in earlier Sumeria, would have been known to the Hebrews. In that story, the formless water divides into fresh water yielding the god, Apsu, and salty bitter water from which the goddess Tiamat emerges. Eventually other gods emerge, and in their strife and conflict with one another a battle ensues, led by the god Marduk. I'm not going to go into all the details, but essentially what happens is that creation exists as the rubble of that conflict and humanity is created as slaves to be toyed with.²

It is in this context that our story emerges. It's unique. God is: that is God doesn't spring forth out of creation. Moreover God is the sole actor. Whereas in the story of Enuma Elish and other stories (in the Mediterranean world at least) place demands on human beings and insist that the faithful construct a temple, something else happens here.

Let's look at the Creation story. Six day of creation: on day one, light and dark – day and night; day two, sky and sea; day three; dry land and vegetation. Moving to day four, the sun and moon and stars; day five, birds and fish; and on day six, animals creeping upon the earth.

At each stage, God said, "It is good." There were no wars between gods or discussions between animals. God spoke and it was good. After finishing creation, instead of making demands upon humanity, God offers the bounty of creation for our enjoyment and gives us authority to care for what he had made. But what had he made?

Remember earlier, when I said that demands of other gods (in order to appease them) was for human beings to construct a temple? Let's revisit our story in that context. God doesn't seem to be too concerned with having a temple.

When King David suggest to the prophet, Nathan that he would build a temple, we hear, " the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" (2 Sam 7:4-7)

¹ <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/the-new-world/indian-creation-stories/> (Accessed June 6, 2020)

² <https://www.ancient.eu/article/225/enuma-elish---the-babylonian-epic-of-creation---fu/> (Accessed June 6, 2020).

God doesn't need people to build him a temple: It already exists. The six days of Creation describe the building of God's temple. First the building: Light and darkness, sky and sea, fertile land. Second, the furnishings: sun and moon and stars to fill the light, birds and fish to fill the sky and sea, and animals to fill the land. The temple is built. God sees it and says, "It is good." But a temple without one thing is but another building. A temple needs an idol – an image of the deity.

So after declaring that it was all good, God says, "Let us make humankind in our image." The Hebrew word we translate as "*image*" is used once again in Scripture – in Numbers – where it is translated as "*idol*." The purpose of an idol was to give expression to the god. Whatever was done to or for the idol, was done to or for the god, so that the image might have power.

Do you see that distinction? Between those other stories and ours? Instead of subjecting us statues of gold or wood, or to the whims of nature; our God – doesn't demand a temple but created his own, offering us the privilege to make it holy.

Regardless of whether your understanding of Scriptural authority rests on a literal six-day event, or whether modern knowledge and the sciences inform you about the mechanics of the universe, I hope we can agree that this story is most importantly a description of who we are in relation to God and creation, and who God is with regards to us.

If we can agree on that, it can and should affect how we live. I once heard in a sermon – and I've preached it myself – that the story of Creation in Genesis is a song. As such, it could be merely symbolic. I even titled the sermon for today, "Song of Creation." My research for today, however, told me differently. Genesis 1 is at once prose but a poetic prose. If that makes sense. It speaks literally to God's hand in creation, even as it more accurately expresses its identity, our identity, God's identity rather the mechanics.

When God creates and says, "It is good," we hear something different than in the other myths that we are in conflict with nature, or that the material world is unimportant. God said, "It is good." God also said that we have a special role to play in continuing the act of creating. It can't be avoided even when sin seems to prevail.

Sister Helen Prejean – you may heard about her in the movie *Dead Man Walking*, the story of her ministry with death-row inmates. Hear what she had to say:

"In creating, we imitate God...To be a creator is part of what it means to be a human being. I met a guy on death row in Arizona who had nothing... So he would unravel his socks and weave little necklaces with crosses out of the threads. The first time I visited another death-row inmate, he gave me a picture frame he'd made out of gum wrapper foils.

"These men were locked in a small cell twenty-three out of twenty-four hours a day; they had absolutely nothing, and still they were reaching out to create something out of beauty and worth."³

It's innate – this experience of being created in the image of God; so that even when our own sin or the sin of others obscures the goodness of creation. It yearns to break through.

Yet, when we look around it seems as if there is conflict: between people and nature. The grass won't give me a break from the mowing, and dandelions further the challenge. Okay. That's sort of superficial. But as human beings given authority over the earth we need to remember that God's offer of dominion wasn't so that we might conquer but to tend and to create.

³ Edward K Rowell, *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000) 35.

How might we our lives change when we see all of creation as God's temple? Forgive my crassness, but I need to make a strong point here. We wouldn't defecate on the chancel of a church building. How can we pour toxic wastes into God's rivers and oceans? We wouldn't ignore the leak in a church roof arising from shoddy workmanship. How can we ignore our role in global climate change?

More importantly, when remember that each person – even those on death row – has been made in the image of God – and that what we do to or for the image we do to God (Didn't Jesus say something like that: "What you do for the naked, the prisoner and the hungry, you do to me;" (Mt 25:31-45) that is: how you treat the needy, the oppressed, the other – says, what we think about God's love?) That was Jesus right? The Son of God who willingly died on a cross – not because humans had been so exemplary in our lives – but to free us from our sin, that was Jesus. Right?

When we remember that about other human beings how can we say, "All lives matter," (and they do. All lives matter.)? But how can we say, "All lives matter," in response to the testimony for (i.e. the protest) recognizing that "Black lives matter."? And not as an afterthought that black lives matter, too,; but a recognition that too often in our society, black lives (if they matter at all) don't matter that much, how can claim to be honoring the God who made us?

But we do have that capacity. Each of us. The ophther side is that you matter. You matter a lot, to God. As much as our "insignificant" actions have contributed to sin in the world, God can do much more with each simple act of justice, kindness and mercy than we can imagine.

Remember, that seventh day? That only happened after God entrusted us with his creation saying, our presence was "very good." That tells me – and I hope it tells you - that God has confidence in our capacity to overcome the consequences of sin in the world through the life he offered through his son, and our Lord, Jesus Christ. AMEN