

Sermon – 6/7/2020 “Made for a Shared Life”

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It is fitting on this Trinity Sunday to hear again that opening chapter of Genesis, even though many of us only hear this first of the two Creation narratives that begin our Bible in the context of the culture war debate over the teaching of the science of Evolution vs. the insistence of some conservative religious voices that the Biblical story must be treated as an alternative, equally, scientifically valid argument. Now this is not Evolution Sunday, that was back in February, where I like to remind folk that this story of Creation is not presented in our scripture as science nor should it be received as such, and it would be less than realistic given all we know about the vast universe and the age of our planet to insist on a literal reading of the story, that leads our friends down at the Creation Museum to believe that the world is only 6000 years old, and was created in a mere 7 – 24 hour days. My point, often in that sermon, quite simply is that you can be a person of faith who takes the texts of Scripture seriously and also accept the findings of science, including Evolution, because there is a significantly more accurate and helpful way to read the creation narrative in chapter one of Genesis.

So, for our purposes then this morning, I want to suggest that that entire conversation tends to distract us from the deeper insights, profound beauty and theologically rich message contained in this passage of sacred text. The act of trying to force these texts to serve a political agenda by insisting that they can only be understood as historically accurate, scientific descriptions of the origin of the universe in exact detail, forces us to look away from the way these texts actually functioned in the community that birthed them, told them and read them together.

In fact, these rich theological narratives were likely shared to cultivate an understanding of life rooted in the radical idea that God is the Source of all being, and describes humanity as made in God’s own image, and then looks at the whole of Creation as not only good, but as life sustaining and worthy of our care. And the reason this story came to mean so much to the people of Israel, is that it was a powerful counter narrative to the

dominate message of the Babylonian Empire, which had dragged these people of God off into exile, after laying waste to their sacred city of Jerusalem and the Temple where they gathered to worship God.

These conquerors of the Jewish people, who had dragged them into exile had a very different story of Creation. This tale, the Enuma Elis, the epic creation myth of the Babylonians, as these stories tend to do, encapsulated their worldview and helped define the reality they sought to inhabit. The quick version of this myth is that creation grew out of a great and violent war between two existing gods, with the winner of course being the Babylonian God, Marduk, who dominates and ultimately destroys all his enemies in a great battle. Marduk sacrifices one of the other gods, and uses their blood, together with bone, to create human beings, whose only purpose as described in the tale is to serve the needs of the gods. This tale asserts that Marduk is thus the greatest of the Gods, especially over the gods of their enemy Assyria. Like the Biblical tale, the story moves from Chaos ultimately to Creation, which includes the ordering of the days, but with creation being the result of battles, violence, and destructive forces, with humanity seen only as a pawn, meant only to serve the gods, and of course those who speak for the Gods, the priests of Marduk who serve at the wishes of the Babylonian rulers. Thus, the chaotic violent world they describe is only resolved in the tale by Marduk and Babylonian dominance, it's a creation myth that justifies control and cruelty, and is used to get humans to toe the line. As myths and stories tend to do, the Enuma Elis creates meaning for people, and gives them a purpose, albeit to serve the Babylonian Empire's desires. You can see then, how a creation story takes on real political import to the Children of Israel living in captivity, re-defining how life is intended to work, and who is in charge, and what role people are to play.

So, in the story we read in Genesis, we experience a very different story, one that is counter-cultural to the point of being revolutionary in its thinking, a subversive set of ideas that would have nurtured a very different view of the world and of the role and destiny of the people themselves as it was told and envisioned by the people of faith living in Babylonian captivity. Like the Enuma Elis, Genesis too begins with a chaotic

void, but God is not at war, rather God's Spirit is viewed as hovering over the dark face of the deep, perhaps the way a mother hen broods over her aimless chicks. God speaks and the world responds, bringing order out of chaos, separating light from dark, day from night, water from sky. Biblical scholars tell us there are numerous clues that this story is told in such a way as to be used in a worship liturgy, a song of praise to the Creator. At the end of each day, as God speaks and the chaos is ordered into shape, God looks at what has been done, what has been made and affirms that God saw that it was good. And the idea that order is made by separating one thing from another, leads scholars to posit that this is a construct made by Priestly authors, and thus likely shaped as liturgy for public worship, as it is often the goal of priests to separate that which is sacred and holy from that which is common and ordinary.

Another feature of this Genesis story of Creation worth noting is that the world that is taking shape is not the haphazard result of battles fought, but the orderly progression of a God moving the world from chaos to beauty, from formless void to fruitful life. Further while in many of the days the shaping of creation is done in a nearly general way, in an almost impersonal fashion, the setting of the lights in the dome of the sky, the continued separation of light from dark, day from night, and God sees that it is good, there is evening and there is morning, day four. Then God brings forth living creatures in the waters, and then in the skies, and God sees that it is good, there is evening and there is morning, day five. But as God enters day six, things slow down and God pays more attention to the details as God brings forth on dry land every kind of living creature, and God sees that it is good, but we're still in day six, and God is not done, God draws closer.

And then God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." Now here's where we need to draw closer ourselves, because God is telling something very interesting about who God is, and who we are intended to be. First God is using the plural pronouns "us" and "our," and while that may be like the Royal "we," on this Trinity Sunday we should not be shy to suggest that God is One in relationship, and we have encountered that very One in a variety of expressions, or persons – God

the Creator, whom Jesus prayed to as a Beloved Parent; God the Redeemer, the Word made Flesh, whom we encounter in the humanity of Jesus the Christ; and God the Sustainer, the Holy Spirit, that is God's Spirit hovering over the formless void in Genesis, and Christ's Spirit coming upon the disciples in Pentecost, the one Jesus promised to send, an Advocate, a Comforter.

The theology of the Trinity can get really convoluted, and we tend often to over think it, but when I teach Confirmation, I like to tell the middle schoolers that these are just 3 profoundly unique ways in which humans have experienced God... now the heretic in my always wants to ask, "why do we stop at 3?" But don't listen to that guy, 3 is plenty, and 3 is enough. And what we mean when we say that God is known to us in three ways, yet God is one, is that we are affirming that the God who transcends the whole of this big, beautiful, massive universe, is also present to us in the loving healing ways of the person Jesus, and as close to us as our next breath. If you need a more concrete definition of the Trinity than that, I'm afraid I'm going back to, "well, kids, it's a mystery."

But one significant take away from the Israelites who handed down this story of Creation in Genesis 1, is that God is not a warrior like other gods, like Marduk, marked by destruction, battle and blood-lust, but God is shaping and ordering, being Creative, and God is in Relationship. That's the beauty of God being known in three expressions or persons, because one of the things we affirm about God is that God is intimately caring in God's own being. Remember Jesus who taught his disciples that when you pray, you can refer to God as "Abba," as Daddy, Father and Mother, that's God's intimacy within God's own self, and God wants to share that intimacy with humanity, because God says, "let us make humankind in our image." God makes us like God's own self, we are made for relationship, with God and with each other. The Babylonians tell the story so that humankind are intended to be God's slaves, but Jesus tells his disciples that we can be God's friends. Do you see how radical a statement this is?

And if you spend any time thinking about this, it gets more radical, not less. God makes all of humankind in God's own image and likeness. So perhaps the most important take away here is this: whether you believe

that all of humankind has descended from the literal Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, or if you believe the evolutionary scientists who point back to a pre-human ancestor who lived in Ethiopia 3 million years ago, that walked upright that they named "Lucy," after the Beatles song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," the central point worth taking home is that all humankind is related, we all come out of Africa from a common ancestor, and we are not distinct from one another because of the color of our skin, or our ethnicity, language or culture, humanity, like God, is one. We should not make a god of our tribal identities, claiming one is superior to the other, we are all made in the image and likeness of God.

So, literally, Genesis teaches us, if we are willing to listen, that racism is an offense to our very human identity, and to God who created all things. The creation myth of the Babylonians was used to diminish all non-Babylonians, their God was the warrior Marduk, and they were his followers so they were the bosses, and the rest of humanity, and especially the Jewish followers of Yahweh, were to be their slaves. The thinking confirmed their national religious prejudice that Babylonian lives mattered, and the lives of slaves did not, so you could work slaves to death, you could use them for your own pleasure (I mean they were your slaves), you could lynch them, you could put your knee on their neck until they died, because they were slaves, they were not Babylonian, they were not the children of Marduk.

So, the Children of Israel, the slaves of the Babylonian oppressors told this other, very different story, which shaped life very differently than the Creation myth of the Babylonians, because that is the purpose behind the stories we tell, to teach and give meaning. It was a story that gave them hope, and purpose. It told them that the God of the universe, had not just made all of humanity, but had made all of humanity in God's own image and likeness. So, each one of them was made in God's image, and each one of them mattered. There was order, and purpose, and meaning to be found in this life because life was a gift from God, and it was good. In fact, God looked at everything that God had made at the end of that sixth day and said, "it is very good."

And it followed that if each one of them, each Israelite was made in the image of God, and since all humanity looks back to one common ancestor,

call her Eve or call her Lucy, each and every person they saw, every human being they met was also made in God's very image, including the Babylonians. They could not look into the eyes of any other human being and not be looking into the eyes of God. That radically, subversive message gave the Israeli's hope, it gave them a sense of purpose, and it shaped their self-awareness, and it shaped how they related to one another and to the world that God had created, as they realized now they were called to be caretakers.

When the Ten Commandments were placed into practice, they understood that because they shared a common humanity they were not to harm or kill one another, they were not to lie or steal from one another, they were to honor each one's relationships and each other's possessions and accomplishments to live in the highest form of human community, which makes for shalom... or peace. And the prophets came along who taught them that one of the ways you honor your common humanity is that you look around your community and care for the most vulnerable, the widows and the orphans, the poor and the needy, because common sense said that if the most vulnerable people in your community were being cared for, if their needs were being met then you could be assured that everyone else would be doing just fine too.

Of course, when Jesus showed up, he took abstract laws about human morality and behavior and made them personal. Jesus said that the whole of the law could be encapsulated in two commandments, to love God, in whose image you were made, and to love your neighbor as yourself, because no matter who that neighbor is, like you they too are made in the image of God. And of course, just like the Babylonians, Jesus' followers wanted to know if that included even the neighbors they didn't like, the neighbors who didn't look like them. And we all remember, how Jesus told them a story where the best neighbor, the most kind and caring person was a Samaritan, someone they all hated, because Jesus wanted his followers to remember the lesson of Genesis, that they are made for relationship, and that they should love their Samaritan neighbor, their black neighbor, their brown neighbor, their Asian neighbor, their Native neighbor, their gay neighbor, their Republican or Democrat neighbor, I bet

Jesus even wants me to love my racist neighbor, and I'm telling you right now, that's going to take a lot...

But I tell you all this because I believe that Jesus was hardcore about that whole love thing... I think he really meant it... in fact Jesus, like the prophets before him was very concerned about the most vulnerable people of his time, in the Beatitudes he calls them the Blessed, those who are poor, those who are grieving, those who are going hungry, those who long for peace and justice. And later in Matthew, Jesus even says that when you feed the hungry, when you give healthcare to the sick, when you work for justice for the oppressed, it's like you are doing it to him, because each one of those people you meet, all those people you see on the TV marching, each one of them is made in the image of God, he even told his followers that they should love their enemies... and you know as hard as it is to imagine, and to even think about, like I said before, I think he meant it.

That's why Jesus said that radical, subversive, loving thing in the passage from Matthew this morning, he told his disciples that they should "go therefore and make disciples of all nations," by baptizing them in the name of God the Father/Mother of us all, the Son Jesus the Redeemer of us all, and the Holy Spirit that sustains us all, teaching all people to obey his commandments to love God and love all our neighbors..." and then Jesus, I think recognizing that he was asking us to do a hard thing, assured us that we are not going to have to do this alone, remember he told his disciples that he was not going to place a heavy yoke upon them, he was not going to treat them like slaves, he was not Marduk, and he was not a destroyer or a warrior who seeks to dominate the battlespace, no, Jesus says... remember this I am with you always.

Today, I'm glad for the witness of this beautiful, creative Genesis story that affirms that God is a God in relationship, a God who gives life, a God who makes humanity in God's own image and a God who is our friend, and a God who wants us to go and be like him, live and love in God's likeness, to go into the world and make friends, to be in relationship with all of creation, with the world God has made, and find ways to protect it and sustain in so that our grandchildren and their grandchildren can enjoy this

wonderful world that has been so lovely to be alive in. And God wants us to go and do our best to love all the different kinds of people that God has made. God affirms the great diversity and beauty of life and intends for us to share it with one another. Now I'm betting when you all saw that sermon title, "Made for a Shared Life," you sighed with relief, and you thought to yourselves, oh good, it's not going to be one of his "social justice" sermons, pushing all our political buttons and making us nervous. And you were right, I preached a sermon based on the lectionary text of Genesis, about the good world that God has made, that we all get to share. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

Dear friends, dearly beloved, I love you all, and my prayer for us and for our nation right now is just that... let love rule. Because the fruit of love is shalom, which is peace, justice, creativity, beauty, kindness and mercy. That is why the prophet Micah could conclude that serving this Creator God did not make us slaves, but as friends only required to do 3 simple things; Do justice, Love kindly, and walk humbly together with your God. It's my opinion that these are things we all really could use right now. Let me send you on your way with this benediction from Second Corinthians... but first a joke... "So 2 Corinthians walk into a bar... and after they pick themselves up, rubbing their foreheads the Rabbi says to the Minister (rubbing her head) ... that was a low blow."

The Message says it this way: "And, that's about it, friends. Be cheerful. Keep things in good repair. Keep your spirits up. Think in harmony. Be agreeable. Do all that, and the God of love and peace will be with you for sure. Greet one another with a holy embrace (as soon as you can put physical distancing behind you). All the brothers and sisters say hello. "Hello." Now, The amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, the extravagant love of God, the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you." Amen. Now go have a play date with God.