

Sermon
Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen
September 10, 2017
Gen 1:1-2:4a

“God’s Work, Our Hands; United in Christ’s Love, A Just World for All”

I’ve had Julie Andrews from the Sound of Music in my head this past week in anticipation of worship today. “Let’s start at the very beginning. A very good place to start. When you read you begin with (a,b,c). When you sing, you begin with (do, re, mi).” When we read the Bible we begin with “In the beginning, God created all that is. God named it and blessed it and called it good. Very good.”

Please be with me in prayer. May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

When we talk about the arc of God’s redemptive action through the arc of scripture, as we’ll be doing this year with the narrative lectionary, it makes sense to start with the first words of the Bible: “In the beginning ...”

In the beginning was the One who spoke creation into existence, ordered the chaos, separated the dry land from the sea, set the sun and moon and stars in the heavens, made the creatures of the sea and land, brought forth vegetation, and made humanity in God’s own image. ... In the beginning was the Spirit, who is the

breath of God, sweeping over creation. ... In the beginning was the Word, the creating and redeeming act itself, later known to us in the person of Jesus the Christ.

“In the beginning.” ... Our ancestors told the story of the beginning to tell the story of Yahweh and their relationship to this God of Israel. They began to tell the story and recount it from generation to generation hundreds of years before it was actually written down. They borrowed part of their story from the other origin stories in the Near East, such as the Enuma Elish from the Mesopotamians, with the great god Marduk. But by the time the story was written, which is speculated to be around the time of the Babylonian exile, the origin story of the Israelites had its own distinct flare.

By the time this story part of the canon—that is, the content of sacred scripture—it was a particular theological statement. In exile the Israelites came to know that God was God. The sun and moon and stars were not gods, as the Babylonians contended. Rather, the god whom they knew as Yahweh was the one and only God. In exile they came to understand that God was not limited to the particular geographical location of Jerusalem, but was present even in their exile.

The creation stories (there are two version of it in the first two chapters of Genesis) were written before what we know of today as scientific inquiry and history. The fact that there are two varying stories set side-by-side in the canon

should caution us against looking to the stories as literal descriptions of how the world came to be. Rather, our creation stories are statements of faith.

If this is true, what were these faith affirmations? Among them, all that exists was brought into being through the work and will of God and belongs to God, including humanity. Because everything has been brought into being by and belongs to God, all that exists is related. Martin Luther King, Jr. phrased it this way: “In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” And in our creation stories, everything that was made was blessed by God. As Bruggeman and Linafelt write, “The creation stories are an affirmation of the goodness of the world intended by God.”¹

In the creation story assigned today at the start of our Narrative Lectionary year, the first story we find in Genesis, there are some interesting things to notice that we’ll want to pay attention to as we move ahead in the stories over the coming year. For example, the first verse starts with: “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.” (NRSV) In other words, the world was a place of chaos to which God brought order, light, and life. This motif of chaos that is contrary to the will of the Creator gets played out again and again in scripture, in terms of humanity’s

¹ Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt in *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 52.

actions that are contrary to the goodness of God's intent for creation. Often what throws the world into chaos is injustice—that is, anything that works against the blessedness and goodness of creation. There is need for the creative act, the redemption of a chaotic world, to be ongoing. Watch for how this plays out in the stories we'll hear in the coming months.

Another note of interest in this first story is the language that male and female together were created in the image of God. This equality of gender is a pretty amazing statement given the patriarchal context out of which the Bible arose. The fact that this statement of faith gets overpowered and even lost in other parts of scripture makes this initial declaration that much more significant to attend to when it comes to participating with God in the work of justice. But we also need to make sure that in interpreting the scripture in a liberating way for women we don't create additional chaos for those who don't identify as either male or female by denying that they, too, are blessed by God as part of the good creation. Rather, we need to insist on a broad definition that humanity—in all of its diversity—is intended here.

A third unique aspect of the first creation story is the phrase that humanity is made in God's image. Set that next to the verse related to humanity having been given dominion over the rest of creation and see how that changes the understanding. For too long, this story has been used as a justification that the non-

human parts of creation are ours to use and exploit as personal resource. However, the Creator does not create in order to use and exploit, but to care for and delight in. We human beings, therefore, as creatures in God's image, should have the same relationship with the rest of creation: caring for and delighting in.

In our creation story we witness God's work: creativity, redeeming a chaotic world, interdependence, equality, responsible stewardship, blessing, naming goodness. Being made in God's image, we are partners in that work. Our hands, our feet, our minds, our hearts, our creativity are called to be in service to God's blessing of a good creation.

As the story continues to unfold in the Christian context, we witness a continuation of the Creator's work, the Word spoken in the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus doesn't introduce us to a new God, a God separate from that of the Hebrew Bible. Rather, Jesus points us anew to the same God who "in the beginning" created a good and blessed world and who invites us into the first intentions of creation, the Kingdom of God, in which relationships among all creation and with the Creator are right and just.

Our interpretation of the creation story is critical for us as Christians because our statements of faith have real-world consequences in our actions. I can think of several examples from just that past few days.

First when Hurricane Harvey hit, and again as Irma was poised to strike, I

heard—as I have so many times before—that these extreme weather events were the result of the sin of homosexuality. A queer colleague of mine posted on his Facebook page: “Gay sex causes hurricanes? Wow, I’m powerful!”

We who are affected by these crackpot theories need to laugh at them, lest we give them the power to take away our humanity. A humanity that was blessed and called good by the Creator. But too many people are harmed when others deny the essential faith affirmations of our scripture’s creation story. Last week, for example, I received a call from a friend. She wanted to know if I had any information about scholarships for LGBTQ youth. A lesbian friend of her daughter’s, who is beginning her last year in college had been outed to her family, and they told her: “You are no longer our daughter. This is no longer your house. We will no longer help pay for your college.” This young woman’s entire life has now changed. God’s blesses her humanity. But since her family is no longer willing to be God’s hands in the blessing, my friend is trying to be so.

And this week, we also saw our president rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program for undocumented youth. Not only was a program taken away, but lies were told about these young people that attempt to strip them of their humanity. God blesses them and calls them good; God needs our hands to work for their justice. Yesterday, at a rally at the capitol, I heard young Dreamers in anguish about the potential of losing the only home they’ve ever known and all

they've worked for. Yet, I also heard many voices raised in solidarity. This is the hope. We do this holy work of justice because we trust the affirmations our ancestors made about God and about the world that God created. We do this holy work because we know that God saw all that was created and said, "It is good. Very good." ... Amen.