

The World God Created
Genesis 1:1 – 2:3
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
July 8, 2018
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Today we are beginning a series of sermons which will last through most of the summer. We will be looking at various pieces of scripture with the goal to look again and read again. Some of these texts will be stories that are very familiar to us – those that perhaps we think we know so well we don't even need to open our Bibles. Some of these texts will be stories that trouble us – those that either have troubling content or whose common interpretations trouble us. What I am hoping we will do together is pause, set aside what we've heard before, read again to see what is actually on the pages of the story, and listen again to hear what was actually intended when the story was first written. Together we might hear both things that delight us and we might also hear some things that trouble us. Together we will find some moments of relief when we hear anew some of these old stories and together we will need to wrestle with the realities of what our Bible contains.

So, having said that, today we begin this journey at the beginning of Genesis, the first book in our Bibles, the first book in the Hebrew Scriptures, that which Christians traditionally have called the Old Testament.

The book of Genesis opens with not one, but two stories of creation. Jon read the first of these for us today. And if we were paying attention, we might have noticed that some things we think are in the creation story were missing. After all, what we have commonly done – just as we have done with Jesus' birth narratives – is to combine the two stories together. But today we take a moment and remind ourselves that there are actually two creation stories that were

recorded at different times and that come from different traditions. But both of which were of value to the ancient people.

The one we heard today – from the first chapter of Genesis – comes from what is commonly called the priestly tradition. And, although it is really the later of the two stories¹, we can see why it is the first one we hear. After all, this account of creation is written as poetry or liturgy. It reads like a hymn. It is written with stanzas and refrains. We hear again and again throughout this telling of creation words like, “God said, ‘Let there be...’”; phrases like, “And it was so”; and the repeated celebration of, “God saw that it was good.” This telling of the creation story is a hymn of praise and so it makes sense that, just as we sing praises to God when we gather to worship, our canon, those books considered scripture, would begin with a song of praise to a God who is understood to be the creator of all.

And just that acknowledgement – that this creation story is a hymn – reminds us of the first thing that Christians have often done wrong in reading this passage.

See, too often Christians have tried to use this opening story of Genesis as a way to date the beginning of the Earth or to prove or disprove science. Too often this story has been in the middle of a war between faith and science. And yet, the story does not ask to be there.

Remember, not only was neither creation story recorded as text for a science book, but these were both recorded before there was a modern understanding of science at all. And so, any fights that we create between religion and science are fights of modern people, but not fights of the ancient people nor fights that scripture itself is asking to be part of.

But let us not think that this devalues what we have read. While the ancient people and those who recorded these stories did not expect them to be read as either scientific or historical

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), 63. Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 likely written in the 500s BCE while Genesis 2:4 – chapter 3 like written in the 900s BCE.

accounts, that does not decrease their value. In fact, for the ancient people these stories and many stories, especially those in the early chapters of Genesis, would have been understood to be myths.

And here we must pause. After all, as Marcus Borg writes, “that term [myth] needs careful explanation, because it has been virtually ruined by its most common modern use. In popular language, ‘myth’ is a dismissive term. To call something a myth is to dismiss it: one need not take it seriously. A myth is seen [by modern people] as a mistaken belief, a falsehood.

“But the term means something very different in the study of religion...myths are metaphorical narratives about the relation between this world and the sacred.”² And “while myths are not literally true, they can nevertheless be profoundly true.”³

So, our first step in hearing what the creation stories offer us is to set aside our expectation that they are answering modern questions or talking about creation in a modern, scientific way. These stories are “profoundly true” even as “their purpose is not to provide a factually accurate account of the world’s beginnings.”⁴ Rather, these stories answer – in the best way the ancient people knew how – the questions that they had...questions about where the world came from, how things worked, what their role in the world was, and how they were to relate to God.

And if we can remove our modern lenses for a moment, what we will find is that the truths revealed in these stories still matter and still answer the questions of our hearts.

So, what are those truths?

² Borg, 71.

³ Borg, 62.

⁴ Borg, 61.

First, both creation stories – even as they represent God and God’s interaction with creation differently from one another – both remind us of God’s investment in creation. Neither story has to be in conflict with all the amazing information modern science gives us, even as both claim that somewhere out there is a divine being from whom we all came, from whom all of creation came. In other words, if we can look beyond the need for scientific evidence as we read these stories, then we will discover that what they offer us is lives “grounded in the sacred.”⁵

And just imagine what this world would be like if we lived more convincingly as those whose lives grew out of the power and love of our living God.

What other truths do we find here?

We find the truth of the centrality of relationships to our very being. And we hear it differently in each creation story. Remember, in the story that Jon read to us, we hear a story of a God who speaks creation into existence. When it comes to the sixth day and the creation of humankind, let us not miss that God is spoken of in the plural – even God is identified as already being in relationship within God’s ownself – as somehow being a “them” rather than a “he” or a “she.” And in this story when God creates humanity, God creates both male and female together...not one first, not one dominant, but both together. And in that creation not only are human beings in relationship with each other and with God, but they are made to be in caretaking relationship with the rest of creation.

Then when we add the second creation story into the conversation, we also see a God who doesn’t just stand at a distance and speak things into existence, but rather who lives in the same neighborhood, who gets dirty and is physically invested in the process of creating. So, the two stories together remind us that while God is out there somewhere, God is also intimately

⁵ Borg, 80.

involved in our lives and the life of all creation. **Just imagine what this world would be like if we lived more convincingly as those whose lives were made for caring relationships – with creation, with humanity, with God.**

What else do we find in this story?

Perhaps this next one is less about what we find here and more about what we've been told is here. While the creation story is the ancient people's telling of their origin story...while it is their telling of their understanding of the significant relationship between people and God...while it is their explanation of why people are like they are especially in contrast to other parts of creation...while all of these are true, what is unfortunate is that too often it has been used for other purposes. Two come to mind, both of which are about oppression that is not part of the creation story, even though many have been told otherwise.

In 2001 the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was held in Kansas City and was held jointly with the United Church of Christ. Whether it was because we were two more progressive denominations or because we had a report coming to us from the discernment committee on the participation of gay and lesbian persons in the life of the church, whatever prompted it, we had protestors outside the convention center, likely from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, KS. I recall seeing a small group of folks standing on the corner holding signs, one of which said, "It is Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

Let me be clear. The creation story is not an anti-homosexual story. When the creation story talks of Adam and Eve, it talks of man and woman because it understands the importance of procreating, of populating the earth. It was not written as a statement on right or wrong relationships, but rather the charge offered is to "be fruitful and multiply."⁶ And, while

⁶ Genesis 1:28, NRSV.

appropriate in its time – both in the setting of a new world with few humans and also in the context within which it was recorded which was as the people of Israel were returning from exile and trying to again establish themselves as a people...while both of these were appropriate times for a focus on procreation, we are reminded time and time again that today we live in an overpopulated world and even heterosexual couples are well served to consider whether to keep multiplying.

The other misunderstanding that has led to the oppression of many is about gender. I remember standing next to a dear friend in her wedding as the pastor talked about how her husband was the head of the household. He cited not only a New Testament passage about obedience, but also the idea from the second creation story that the woman comes from the man's rib and is therefore meant to stand beside as one protected by her man who is her head. Interestingly enough, Genesis doesn't actually tell us that.

In fact, those who can read the Hebrew know that the words used in Hebrew are different over the course of the story. As the telling of the creation of humans begins in Genesis 2, the word used for humanity is *adham*. And this isn't a proper name as we come to understand it, but a play on the word *adhamah* which is the word for dust. In other words, all humans are "dust-creatures".⁷ And, in fact, this is not a word that associates gender with humanity. Rather, when a second being is created the Hebrew words used are different – *ish* and *ishah* – and here we get two distinct genders, again for the purpose of partnering to procreate. Even the idea of creating a second being is about mutuality. But we have to really pay attention because even though the language in the NRSV reads, "a helper as a partner"⁸ too often our patriarchal systems have focused on the second being, assumed to be the woman, as a helper *rather* than partner. **But**

⁷ Borg, 69.

⁸ Genesis 2:18, NRSV.

just imagine what this world would be like if we lived more convincingly as those who understood the intentions of God's creation and didn't use details fitting in their original context as a way to manipulate and oppress people living in a very different context.

And perhaps, most foundationally, the truth that we need to hear in this story is the truth of goodness. Too often churches have focused on the stories which come in the following chapters – stories out of which we have created such concepts as original sin and out of which many a hellfire and brimstone sermon has come. And yet, we need not forget where the story begins...we need not forget the refrain of God throughout creation...we need not forget the goodness that exists in all creation and the naming that we are created in God's image. **Just imagine what this world would be like if we lived more convincingly as those who understood ourselves, our world, our God to be good.**

Friends, as people of faith we claim to be people of the book. And yet, too often we don't listen to the what these stories really say. But we are invited, by the gift of these creation stories, to live more fully and more wholly as people who are created by and connected to God, people who are meant to live in loving relationship not only with humanity but with all creation, people who all have value, and who are all, at our core, good. If we listen to the scripture we will find that this is the world God has created.

Amen.