

Grace to you and peace from God the Creator and from Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

The title of this sermon is rather un-Lutheran; it sounds graceless: “Three Steps to Salvation.” You’ll see what I mean by the use of this phrase at the end of our message today.

Now, did you know that there are at least *six* stories of how God created the world in the Bible, five of which appear in the Old Testament? Six stories! Can you guess, in which writings of the Old Testament five of them appear? Genesis, Job, and the Psalms, a couple of the psalms. Let’s talk about each briefly.

First, Genesis 1–3 actually contains two creation stories, not one. The first creation story can be found in Genesis 1:1–2:4. This is the story with which we are all familiar. God creates the world in a pattern of sequenced events, beginning with the cosmos, then the world itself, then vegetation, then animals and then finally human beings in God’s image. God pronounces each of these “good,” culminating with “very good” at the end of the story. There we learn that God rests on the seventh day of creation, which is why the number seven is lucky; it’s God’s number.

Now something about this narrative that I am learning is that in Israel, as in the rest of the ancient Near East, the interest centered not in the creation of matter out of nothing, but in the conferring of *order out of chaos*. So, in the beginning, God’s Spirit sweeps over the waters of a primeval ocean, which symbolizes chaos. Subsequently, God orders that chaos to fashion a cosmos and within it, our world. That’s the first creation story.

The second, as you know, appears in Genesis 2–3. That’s the story of the Earthling, the Human Being, the androgynous individual created by God yet lacking one thing: a companion. The first predicament of human existence here is loneliness! So, God creates other animals, after which God, and Adam, presumably in conversation, determined that none of them are suitable companions – (Perhaps maybe cats) – suitable companions for the Human Being. So, God creates, out of the Human Being’s side, another Being, and these two by the end of the story become known as Adam, which simply means “the Human Being” and Eve, which is another abstract noun meaning “Mother, or Giver of Life.” So that story is the second, and it occurs as I said, in Genesis 2–3. It’s there we learn from a Christian perspective of how an original harmony existed, in this case, in and through all of creation. (But that harmony was disrupted, and I would argue, citing with a feminist scholar named Phyllis Trible, that it’s disrupted when the man claims authority over the woman. That is the beginning of the fall, and with it comes forth sin, and as Paul will say, in Romans 5, death.)

So, we have two creation stories. “But if you order now, there’s a *third* creation story!” It appears in Psalm 148:1-6. Listen closely:

¹Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!

²Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!

³Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

⁵Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.

⁶He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Notice the order that’s imposed on endlessness, or in this case, chaos, “which cannot be passed.”

(So here we have a reference, you may have heard it, to “the waters above.” We’ll talk a little more about that in a moment. But in the ancient Hebraic way of thinking about the cosmos, there was water beneath the ground *and* water above the sky.)

The fourth creation story appears in the book of Job, chapter 38, when God chastises Job for questioning God’s ways. (This to me is an indication that God has actually lost the argument. Whenever a person appeals to power or authority, he or she typically succumbs to the less persuasive side of an argument. I remember this from growing up. When I would argue with my mom, I was sent to my room. I won those arguments, but my mom used her authority and power to send me to my room.)

Let’s listen to Job 38:

“Where were you?” God asks rhetorically, “when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵Who determined its measurements — surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone

⁷when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

You hear the tone?

“Who are you?” God says to Job, “to question me?”

⁸Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb? –
⁹when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
¹⁰and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors, – *notice, again the imposition of order upon chaos* –
¹¹and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

So, in Job 38, we have another creation story, here for the sake of supporting God’s response to Job, who has challenged God – and you know why: Job didn’t do anything wrong, was innocent, and yet he suffered greatly.

Now, the final creation story, at least as far as I know in the Old Testament, is Psalm 104, part of which we read between the first and second readings of our worship service today. Like Genesis 1, Psalm 104 unfolds the ordering of the universe in successive distinct stages. First, God organizes the heavens, by which we refer to the things above. Next, number two, God forms the earth, by command – in the Hebrew, it’s a war cry. So, God forms the earth by a war cry, and the waters, in response to that war cry, retreat, revealing mountains and valleys. Third, God makes provisions for water: springs surge up and rain comes down.

Now you remember what I said about Psalm 148? The old way of thinking was that there were waters above and waters below the ground. How do we know this? Well, anybody who’s seen springs knows that clearly there is water *beneath* the earth, and anyone upon whom it’s ever rained – which in this case, living in Seattle, is basically every day, except for a couple of days in the summertime – anybody who has ever been rained upon knows according to common sense and natural observation that there is water *above* the dome God created in the first creation story, in the sky. So this is the old way of thinking. Basically, what you have is the snow globe: waters above, waters below, which explains rain and springs. Interesting. That’s the science of the fifth century BCE, and in my way of thinking, which follows a number of theologians over the ages, this was God’s way of accommodating to the understanding of the world people had at the time.

Now, like Genesis 1, Psalm 104 continues by fourthly mentioning how God creates vegetation for humans and animals. Then how God provides a moon and sun to control the seasons – which was important because the psalms, this one in particular, were written in an agricultural context. And finally, God tames the seas and domesticates Leviathan. Now who or what is Leviathan? If you read the book of Job, Leviathan is an enormous mythical sea monster who is so strong that it has shields for scales along its back. Nothing, not even the sharpest sphere can penetrate Leviathan. But here in this psalm, Leviathan is not some great sea monster. (If I was doing a children’s sermon, this sea monster I would have purchased at a local toy store, given

it to Amelia, and she would have told everybody once again that it's "Jesus's Mommy," which he did the first time after I gave her and Ethan toys to represent the Gospel reading. I love it. It's really cute.) But here, Leviathan is not some great sea monster or some sea dragon. Leviathan is simply God's plaything. God creates Leviathan for sport. And we see that in verses 24–26. Finally, God controls life, and this is the heart of our Psalm for today. God controls life. Let me read it to you:

Verses 27– 30.

These, (*that is "all beings"*), look to God to give them their food in due season;

²⁸when you give to them, they gather it up;

when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹When you hide your face, (*which is a common phrase we find in the Old Testament*)

they are dismayed;

when you take away their breath, they die

and return to their dust.

³⁰When you send forth your spirit, they are created;

and you renew the face of the ground.

Now Psalm 104:30 in particular is unique among the creation stories we have now surveyed. Again, this text was written in an agricultural context, and it affirms that God's Spirit renews, each spring season, the face of the ground. This implies that God did not *stop* creating on the seventh day according to Genesis 1, God rested to be sure, but God did not stop; *God keeps creating*, as evident in the work of the Spirit, which gives life to successive generations of beings. God's creation of the world, in other words, is ongoing. It's always happening! Each breath, each moment, is a gift, a flash, an expression of the endless outpouring of being and life from God!

As the *HarperCollins Bible Commentary* puts it, "In verses 27–30 Yahweh directs life and death through the gift or withdrawal of the Spirit. The sequence "life death, new life through the Spirit" follows the common Biblical pattern for Jerusalem, or the people of Israel: those persons upon whom God bestows promises, generally succeed at first, are given life, they undergo serious difficulties to the seeming frustration of faith, they confront death, but rise thirdly to a fulfillment never anticipated earlier."

Now that was a lot of work. We really had to get into the weeds, but here, I believe—hope, pray and trust, be merciful—we find the payoff. I want you to focus on this threefold sequence or pattern of **life, death and new life**. Let me reread once more that passage from the *Harper Collins Bible Commentary*:

"In verses 27– 30 of our Psalm for today, Yahweh directs life and death through the gift or withdrawal of the Spirit. So the Spirit is that which gives life, breath and renews the ground. The sequence "life, death, new life through the Spirit" follows the common Biblical pattern for Jerusalem, or the people of Israel. Those persons upon whom God bestows promises, generally first succeed, then undergo serious difficulties, and finally rise to a fulfillment never anticipated earlier."

We see this pattern of life, death, and new life throughout the Bible. Last week, for example, in our Second Reading, 1 Peter:4-5 we heard these words by way of conclusion, listen closely:

¹⁰And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

So life was there; Christians were persecuted, facing death; and then we have the promise: “after you have suffered for a little while, the God of grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you.”

We also see this in the book of Revelation. The author there gives the message of hope to Christians being persecuted, namely, “endure your suffering a little longer, then you will be freed of such suffering.” And historically, that was true. When Domitian died at the end of the first century, the Emperor at the time of Rome, the persecution of Christians, at least for a time, ceased.

Life, death, new life. Now this isn't just a pattern; it's a promise to each of us, one we see in our Gospel reading for today. You know, the overarching story: the disciples experience life being followers of Jesus, but then, inexplicably, he died, and he died the worst way imaginable, by crucifixion. Here they faced serious difficulties with regard to their faith. All seemed lost. The Messiah of God, in whom they had placed all their hopes, had been executed by the Roman government. But then, through the Resurrection, they discovered that death did not have the last word.

Remember Genesis 1 and Psalm 104. God creates and later *renews* life through God's breath, the Spirit. Now, through Christ, God creates new life, in our Gospel reading for today, by breathing into the disciples the spirit of new creation, the spirit of peace. This is the beginning of God's new creation, the birth pangs of a new and totally unexpected chapter, one that *none* of the disciples could have ever, ever foreseen or imagined. This threefold pattern from life to death to new life, this threefold pattern is not unique to the people of Israel, nor to the first followers of Jesus – and here's where I hope everything makes sense – **it applies to each of us in this room today.**

And it does so in two ways.

First, it applies to each of us as individuals. Last week, we had an exercise where I invited you to cast your fears or anxieties onto God by placing them in a box, and those were kept anonymous – they will still be kept anonymous. But what I discovered is that, like me, there are many of you who are anticipating the loss of a loved one, or grieving the loss of a loved one. There are many of you who are experiencing isolation, even after the pandemic. There are even some of you who are worried about having enough money to pay next month's rent. That is the hour of grief. In the sequence I've provided, it's the hour of death.

What I've learned in my own grieving process is this: "Hope is the feeling you have that the feeling you have isn't permanent." *This too shall pass*. Hope is the feeling you have, that the feeling you have isn't permanent. To each of us, this sequence, this pattern, this promise applies. As we experience life, we encounter death in various ways. Then somehow, and in some way, God brings new life. This may not be in any way equivalent, say for example, to losing someone we love, but it does mean that there *is* new life and renewal after such loss. That's God's promise to each of us.

But God's promise not only to each of us as individuals; God's promise is also to us collectively as a congregation. When I received my call to Queen Anne Lutheran Church in 2016, there was life in this congregation. Our forums over the next couple of years expanded, bulging at one point to 57 people in the Fellowship Hall, listening to a professor from the University of Washington on climate change. We also created a new children's ministry. We hired Terry Anderson as our Children's Ministry Coordinator, who helped establish Sunday school again. And I remember even at one point, when we did the Blessing of the Toys for children, we had 15 little kids up here – well, 16, including me – that was life.

But then along came the pandemic, which I take as synonymous with death. Many of us, in fact most of us, were forced into isolation because of that. Because of not attending church over the months that followed, our numbers, when the pandemic "lifted," were significantly down. At one point we had 33 people at our second worship service, which is 60 below, or so, the average from before. Terry, during this time, had left, and all, in my view seemed, at some points, hopeless.

But think about it, if the sequence from "life to death to new life" is true, the sequence we see in the story of Israel, the sequence we see in the story of Christ, and the sequence I hope we experience individually in our own lives – if this sequence is true, we are on the verge of an exciting new chapter for this ministry! New life awaits Queen Anne Lutheran Church, and we're already beginning to see signs of it.

Last week, it was approved that an Appeal to raise money for the Triangle Project, which would open up the front of this church to our neighborhood, providing more opportunity for fellowship consistent with our mission. We have a new Children & Youth Ministry Coordinator in Vannady Keo who, I might say, gives excellent children's sermons. We had a baptism last Sunday. We celebrated the induction of four new members.

And just think about the assets around us. In particular, the fact that Seattle Pacific University is only one mile away – and yet never, as far as I know, in the history of this congregation, have we had a college ministry for students at that school – but that, my friends, is changing. Last Sunday after church and after the vote, we had over 10 students from SPU in our Conference Room, talking excitedly with two younger people in our Conference Room about opportunities for service, as well as a mid-week

Bible study at a church where they could finally ask the questions other churches denied them.

Wow. Are you as excited as I am? On this day of Pentecost, the Spirit is calling us to new life. Can you feel it? You have to trust it. We have to lean into it. We have to let ourselves be moved by it. In short, we need to let go of the past. We need to stop looking backward at what was, and look ahead, inspired by the Spirit, to new possibilities awaiting us in the third chapter of our more recent history.

Dear Friends in Christ, we have learned today that there are at least five creation stories in the Old Testament, which to me, when I first learned this, was kind of mind-blowing. Yet for us, for Queen Anne Lutheran Church, it's the *sixth* creation story that matters most. The one where Jesus breathes new life and renewal *into us* as a congregation.

Yes, we have gone through a period like death, but death will not have the last word. Around the corner, new life awaits us, and who knows what that will look like? Regardless, we need to trust; we need to hope.

May the Holy Spirit therefore inspire us.

May the Holy Spirit give us faith.

May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to new possibilities,
and may the Holy Spirit lead us into a bright and exciting future.

And all God's people said ... Amen.

Really? And all God's people said ... **Amen!**

There's the Spirit!

Thanks be to God.