

Sermon

June 4, 2023 – Holy Trinity Sunday

Why Build a World?
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator and from God's Word visible in the world, Christ our Lord, Amen.

Last week we learned the Old Testament has multiple creation stories, stories of how God created the world. Do you remember what they are? First, Genesis 1, which as you heard, was our first reading for today. We'll return to Genesis 1 in a moment. Next, Genesis 2 – 3. Here we have a depiction of God and what scholars like to call anthropomorphic terms, which is to say, God resembles a human being in this creation there. In the first, God was a spirit that hovered across the waters. In the second, God is a being who walks in a garden and who speaks as we do.

A third creation story can be found in the book of Job, chapter 38. There, God chastises Job, insofar as Job has challenged God, by saying, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" From there we get yet another rendition of how God created the world.

Last week we also learned about Psalm 148:1-6, which differentiates the water above from the water below that God created in the creation process. Why waters above? Because the sky is blue. How do we know waters are beneath the earth? Because of springs and wells. That was Psalm 148.

Then we heard about Psalm 104, which was our psalm reading for last week. There we have the great verse about how God renews the Earth, which suggests that creation isn't something that happened once upon a time in the not-so-distant past, but that rather creation is *always happening*. There's a theologian I remember reading who says, "God makes things make themselves." This suggests that God is continuing in the creative process – the last chapter of which will be the new creation promised, among other places, in Isaiah 25 and Revelation 21.

Now, if you can believe this, I made an oversight. There is one more creation story I didn't mention last week, and that's from Proverbs 8, where we learn about the role of the Spirit, that is Sophia, the divine feminine, and her place in the creation process.

So we have Psalm 104, Proverbs 8, Job 38, Psalm 148, Genesis 2 and Genesis 1. Now today, the first of those creation stories. Genesis 1, as I said, happens to be our first reading. I'm going to talk about why it was chosen as our first reading in a moment, but first, I want to focus on some of the surprising details we often overlook. And for that, I've asked two volunteers to come help me "build a world" – that's TJ and Elizabeth; would you come forward please?

That's a dome. It's the only thing I could find that was transparent in the kitchen in the Fellowship Hall. I looked at Fred Meyer, I looked through – I know this church now better than anybody here, because I've looked in every nook and crevice and cranny.

That's what I could find. It's a dome. Let's pretend. [*Elizabeth and T*] proceed, step by step, to "build a world" with the eclectic props Pastor Dan has gathered for them to represent the Creation story.]

Now, in the beginning, what already existed, according to Genesis 1?

Water, water already existed!

So, all right; so, in the beginning what already existed? In Israel as in the rest of the Near East, the interest centered, as I mentioned last week, not in the creation of matter out of *nothing*, but in the conferring of order out of chaos. The world was a flat, watery Earth – step one.

And what happened? "And God said, 'Let there be a dome – sometimes that's translated "firmament," 'a dome – amidst the waters and let it separate the waters from the waters.'" So again, God separates the waters above from the waters below by putting in place a dome. So far, so good? That's number two.

What came next? That's correct. Verse 9: "And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place and let the dry land appear.'"

So, God makes the sea-level go down; the waters retreat at God's command, revealing mountains and valleys.

Then what happened? Vegetation is created. "God says, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and the fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.'"

What came next? Lights. So, light appears for a *second* time! Did you notice that? Before the creation of stars, God had already created light, which occurs here. How do we make sense of the light that existed before the light? Well, a former colleague of mine at Seattle University, a scientist, said that light here may represent the background radiation of the cosmos... That may go beyond what the author had in mind in the sixth century BCE, but it does generate some ideas. So we have light. What do you need for light? Stars.

So, God – it's really a beautiful, poetic way of describing creation: "God pins the stars" to the ceiling, to the firmament or the dome.

So, we have light that comes from the stars. "God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night.'" So the lights are put there for our purpose. (Perhaps the light mentioned earlier was the light of God...) "And let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years." So, this was written in an agricultural context, where people depended on the lights and the seasons, or rather knowledge of the seasons to grow crops, – "and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth."

"God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day and the lesser night to rule the night and the stars." So, what's the greater light? The sun. And the lesser light?

The moon; very good, very good. So, their purpose is to help us and regulate the seasons.

What follows next, what's created next? Living creatures; animals! "And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly across the Earth or the dome of the sky.

What are the windows for? So, yes, they're for the water to come through. So in Genesis 7: 11, "God opens the windows of the dome through which the water above comes down as rain."

All right, so we have the fish of the sea, and next we have land animals of every kind. And I like to call this the "surf and turf" part of the creative process.

All right, what's last in the creative process? Human beings; so we have human beings. Alright, here we go!

So, what's peculiar here about God, when it comes to the creation of human beings? Well, we learn that God is referred to in the plural and in the singular: it says "Let **us** make humankind in *our* image according to *our* likeness." And then in verse 27, that says "God created them in *his* image." So, the first example of multiple pronouns applied to an entity is actually God.

So, what does the simultaneous creation of men and women in God's image, moreover, tell us about their status before each other and God?

They are equal.

Why do we miss that one? They are equal.

Now what does God see? I want you to step back for a second. What does God see, when God surveys the world God has created? How does God regard it? How does God evaluate it? Is it bad or good? It says, "*good*." And after human beings are created, it says "*very good*." So, God pronounces God's creation good.

And then what does God do at the end of this story? Yeah, God gets tired – you would think! So God rests – not stops, but rests. "Stop" suggests that God is no longer involved in the creative process, which again, according to Psalm 104, from last week, the Scripture states otherwise.

All right, that's a lot of work. Let's thank our volunteers for helping demonstrate the way God built the world according to Genesis 1 and 2.

[*T and Elizabeth return to their seats.*]

All right, let's step back for a second and gather what we've learned. The creative process unfolds in successive orderly stages according to the first creation narrative in Genesis.

God begins with the formation of order out of watery chaos.

Out of that God sets a dome over the top of the water and affixes its pillars to a foundation presumably beneath.

Then God withdraws the water; God creates night and day. God adds stars for the sake of helping us make sense of the seasons.

God adds life. And God concludes by creating human beings, who are made in the image and likeness of God.

This raises a lot of questions for us, doesn't it? Why, for example, do so many people defend Genesis 1, in terms of its scientific accuracy, when, taken literally, it gives us a cosmology – which is to say a view of the universe and how it was created – that is so strange, so foreign, so alien, so contrary to our scientific worldview today?

Now, for my money, this is a beautiful, evocative poetic account of Creation, according to the *ordinary sensory experience* of Hebrews living 600 years before Christ. Look up at the sky. What is it? Obviously, a dome. Where does water come from? From above the dome, as well as from beneath the earth.

So, all of these things reflect what we would call “common sense experience.” And they make their way into the creation narrative that we've learned about here.

Now, if Genesis 1's primary purpose is actually not scientific accuracy, which is what I would argue it is not, then what is it? Why was this account written? In what other ways might it be true? So clearly, from a modern scientific point of view, this is not scientifically accurate, but in what *other* ways might it be true?

Well, let's start with the original context, that is, the audience to whom this was written, and for what purpose. Genesis 1 illustrates to the people of Israel who, in the sixth century BCE, had just been freed from their captivity to the Babylonians.

The Babylonians – and this is fascinating – taught that the world was the byproduct of the slain corpse of Tiamat, the goddess of the sea. According to the story, human beings were crafted from the blood of her illegitimate spouse to be slaves to an array of spiteful lesser gods.

That was the reigning origin story of the Babylonians. The corpse of its goddess Tiamat – Tiamat is slain, her corpse is retained, combined with the blood of her illegitimate spouse, producing human beings as slaves to an array of spiteful lesser gods. Now, can you imagine if that was *our* creation story? I'd have a lot more work to do up here, than just build a world like this!

You can see how Genesis to the Israelites and to us conveys a different kind of truth. It says for example, that the world is *good*, that the world is not some accidental byproduct of death, but rather that the world is good. God repeatedly pronounces it as such.

It says, second, that the world was created by a benevolent God, a good God.

And it says that human beings were not meant to be slaves, but to be free, even to have charge over creation as being made in the image and likeness of God. (My preference here, going with the second creation narrative, is to say that we have been charged to be *stewards* of God's good creation.)

Now, science can tell you many wonderful things. And our recent marine biologist graduate can tell you some of those if you're interested. It can tell us how life evolved – something the order of creation in Genesis actually anticipates.

But it can't place **value** on creation, not as science.

It can't speak of our dignity and freedom as beings made in the image of God.

It can't tell you we should rest, as God did; that we should work to live, and not live to work. Boy, do I need to hear that.

It can't tell you that the Earth, though fallen and flawed, is fundamentally good, and should be treated as such.

And it can't answer the biggest question of them all: Why does the world exist at all? So why, now on religious terms, *did* God go through this heavy labor of creating the world? More specifically, why did God create you and me? What is our reason for being? I'll give you a hint. The answer is one word, and it's not Jesus, although Jesus embodies it:

Love.

Love is the answer to the question of why there is something and not nothing. Love, by nature, is outgoing. It wants to express itself, and we see that in narrative story form, in the creation story of Genesis. It yearns, here, for world creation, for an "other" to be loved. First John says not that God is "a being who loves," it says "God *is* love" and Love by its nature is outpouring, overflowing.

And the Christian way of saying God is love, or that God is relationship from the beginning, even before the creation of the world, is **the doctrine of the Holy Trinity**. The Christian religion, among them all, is the only one that can say conceptually, God is Love *before* the creation of the world, that Love is our reason for being. In other traditions, love, you might say, arises in God's relationship with the world. But for Christianity, because of the Trinity, we can say that God is something like "the rehearsal of love before time" that is realized through time, in the process of creation.

This is why Genesis one was included as our first reading for today. When God says, "Let us make humankind in our image," it hints at multiplicity in God, even though God remains one [verse 27]. That multiplicity makes relationship possible, even before the world began.

To quote the great philosopher Rob Base and DJ EZ Rock, "it takes two to make a thing go right for sure, but it takes three to make it outtasight."

God as Love, as free temporal relationship, in turn, is the source and matrix of everything and anything that exists, which quantum physics has confirmed now for over 100 years. Relationship is at the heart of everything. The Trinity and science tell us so.

Dear Friends in Christ, as beings made in the image of God, we are called to reflect the love of God in our relationship with one another. Elizabeth Dominguez, a theologian from the Philippines, puts it perfectly: "To be in the image of God is to be in community. It is not simply to be a man or a woman who can reflect God, but it is in the community, in relationship, as social beings, we are made in the image of God, and love, we discover, is the answer to everything: Why anything exists at all, why we're here, our purpose in life, how we should live our lives, how we should treat each other and of course, how we should treat the earth."

The Trinity is a rehearsal of love before time, the trace of which appears throughout history. May the love of this Triune God, rehearsed before time and released in the process of creation, live in us collectively, as bearers of the image of God. "No one has ever seen God" we read in First John, "but if we love one another, God lives in us and his [her/their] triune love is perfected in us."

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