

Holy Trinity (A)
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Text: Genesis 1:1—2:4a

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I'd like to invite you to reflect for a moment on how we take in different kinds of information in different kinds of ways. For example, we watch a science or history documentary in a different way than we watch a murder mystery. We know that we should bring different expectations to an investigative reporting article on the front page of the newspaper than we bring to reading an opinion piece because they give us different kinds of information.

I believe that being aware of how we're reading is especially important with our first reading this morning from the book of Genesis, which tells an expansive story of God creating the universe. I believe it's important because of personal experience. When I was in 7th grade, attending a Christian middle school, my science teacher made it absolutely clear to me that I could not be a Christian and accept the theory of evolution. That made a mess out of how I thought about science and faith for years. Unfortunately, at the time I didn't understand that my science teacher read the Bible in a way that I now reject. He believed that the Bible is an infallible source of information about everything—science, history, you name it. It's a tremendously mistaken and unhelpful way of seeing the Bible.

This morning I'd like to explore this creation story with you. We don't read it to learn how old the universe is or how the universe was made. Instead, I'd want to invite you to see this story as the way our Jewish ancestors in faith expressed their deepest convictions about the character of God and the nature of the world. This story is a statement of faith. The key thing to know about both God and the world is that they are good. Creation is God's good gift for all living things. In the creation story, did you notice the orderly progression of days, and how at each step along the way God sees that God's creative work is good. Light and darkness are good, the dome of the sky is good, the dry land and oceans are good. And all of the living things that fill creation are good. In fact, after God finishes the work of creating and gives a blessing to every living thing, God declares that everything is very good.

In order to appreciate what Genesis is trying to say to us, it might help to remember that in the ancient world, there were other stories about how the world came to be, stories that came from other cultures and grew out of very different values—values that Israel's statement of faith rejects. For example, the ancient Babylonian creation story pictures creation as the result of extreme violence. The head of the Babylonian pantheon, Marduk, battles and kills the mother of all the gods, Tiamat, cutting her body into two parts to form the heavens and the earth. It suggests a very grim view of life—that violence is just the way things are. There's another alternative from ancient Egypt and ancient Canaan, but it's really not much better. The Egyptian and Canaanite stories sexualize creation, with stories that make everything about the male god's phallus. That's how creation happens. Against both of those alternatives, Israel's creation story asserts that violence is not the defining characteristic of life and that not everything is about sex. Instead, creation is good and well-ordered and produces abundantly for all living things.

One of the most interesting parts of the story deals with the creation of human beings. The book of Genesis tells us that we are made in the image of God. Male and female, we all carry some quality or character of God. In the ancient world, people usually spoke of the king as the one who was the image of God. They meant that the king represented divine rule on earth. The king subdued chaos for God and established order for God. Isn't it fascinating how the book of Genesis democratizes that way of thinking. It isn't just the high, exalted king who represents God's rule on earth. It is the entire human family, women and men, all of us together. The story invites us to imagine that the human family, as a whole, has a job to do. All of us together are to represent God by tending and caring for God's world.

One other thing I notice is how God isn't the only one who creates. Instead, God calls into being a world that is itself creative. On the third day, God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation." So, the earth did bring forth every sort of plant. And it was all good. On the fifth day, God said, let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures. And it was all good. And then, on the sixth day, God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." It's like a task that God shares with the earth. It turns out that "the creation" is not some kind of finished product. Instead, creation is still in process. I think that makes it especially important what kind of "image of God" the human family turns out to be. We now have a share in God's creating work. We're part of the process, and it remains to be seen what sort of contribution we will end up making to God's world, whether it will be for good or ill.

I wonder what sticks with you about this creation story. Even though it was written around 2500 years ago, I believe it still has power to speak to our imaginations about the character of God and the nature of the world, and maybe also about how to live a genuinely human life. In our time, the Genesis creation story can be a life-giving alternative to ways of looking at the world that are greedy and exploitative, or fearful and despairing. Perhaps you've noticed these kinds of attitudes and feelings showing up in popular culture or public discourse. Some people seem to believe that earth and humanity are simply doomed and the end is near. There are others, though, who act as though everyone should be free to grab for as much of everything as they can get, with no need to consider the wellbeing of earth and neighbors. I hear an incredible range of attitudes and beliefs expressed in movies and social media, but none of them has the kind of life-giving, life-affirming vision for earth and for humanity that Genesis has.

I find that, for me, the best gift this story gives is its reminder that that God's world is good. Even if there are scary stories about tornadoes in the Midwest, hurricanes in the East, and fires on the west coast, all made worse by global warming, that doesn't tell the whole story about the natural world. God's world is meant for life, for life to be fruitful and multiply, and life will rise from the ashes. We're not meant to be passive or complacent in how we care for God's world, but there is room for trust. In fact, trust runs all the way through the creation story—trust that God is good, and that God's creation is good. Trust that there is an orderliness about God's world that makes space for life to flourish. Trust that God provides from the bounty of creation so that there is enough for every living thing. That's the sort of world God gives us and calls us to care for. So we live in trust and generous service. Thanks be to God. Amen.