

Gn 1:1-2:4a
 19 June 2011
 Trinity Sunday

“Creating Co-creating”

There’s a short poem by Stephen Crane, who died in 1900 of tuberculosis at the age of 28. He’s probably best known for his novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Ever since I first read this poem, it always leaves me with a blunt, biting impression. It’s called, “A Man Said to the Universe.”¹ Here it is:

“A man said to the universe: / ‘Sir I exist!’ / ‘However,’ replied the universe, / ‘The fact has not created in me / A sense of obligation.’”

I don’t suppose that I need to point out the darkness of the poem, its rather bleak outlook on life. I imagine the effect of Crane’s bohemian lifestyle on his physical health was a contributing factor. But in case anyone is wondering, the scriptures don’t present creation in quite so gloomy a fashion.

I can’t remember the last time I preached a sermon on the story of creation. (Actually, there are two such stories in Genesis. The first one, which we just read, is the big, sweeping one, the creation of everything. The second one zooms in on the creation of man and woman.) But as I just said, I can’t remember the last time I preached about it. It’s possible that I never have.

Every time this passage has appeared in the lectionary, I’ve always gone with one of the other readings. The creation story gets used and misused. I just get tired with the constant fighting about it. People from a variety of perspectives hijack it and use it for their own agendas. I guess I haven’t felt like I could do justice to it. I have wanted to avoid sounding like I’m just airing my own opinion. But that’s taking the easy way out.

In reality, everything I just said—use and misuse, hijacking of scripture, concerns about pushing one’s own opinions—could be said about the rest of the Bible, as well. It’s just that today’s text has been so frequently singled out for political use. For decades, it’s been dragged into the so-called “culture wars.”

The creation story, amazingly enough, is theology. Like the rest of the Bible, it’s about God—and our relationship with God. It isn’t a textbook on history or science. The study of those things is certainly important, but they shouldn’t be confused with the truth that comes to us through the scriptures. And maybe I should add: truth that comes not just **through** the scriptures, but **only** in the scriptures.

What I hope to do is to show how the story in Genesis isn’t simply about an “event” ages ago, at the beginning of time. Much more importantly, it’s about an ongoing reality, something that concerns every moment of our lives. It’s about God’s love in creation, God’s love for us. It’s about how we are called to **join with** God in **co-creating** God’s good creation.

We should notice that the Hebrew story is different from other stories of creation. In many cultures, this physical reality was (and in some cases, still is) considered to be less exalted. What’s important is the spirit, not this disgusting, foul, fleshly, earthly

¹ www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173305

reality. I'm sure we've heard the saying that we can be too spiritually or heavenly minded to be any earthly good?

The Bible seems to back that up. Notice how many times the phrase is repeated, "God saw that it was good." That applies to all of creation. Genesis says that humans have been created in the image of God (1:26). Nothing we do can erase that. We smear that image, but everyone still bears the image of God. That image of God is the Biblical foundation for human rights.

One question we may have is why this is a text for Trinity Sunday. Christians, not Jews or Muslims or others, are the ones who speak about God as Trinity. Sometimes I complain about how the lectionary misuses the Old Testament. But in this case, I don't think it does that.

Of course, God is all over the place, doing all kinds of stuff, until it's time for Sabbath. There's the **first** Person of the Trinity.

In verse 2, "a wind from God" or "the Spirit of God" makes an appearance. There's the **third** Person. This is the word רוח (*ruah*), which I mentioned last week when I talked about Jesus' breathing on the disciples, giving them the Spirit.

We're told that the Spirit "moves" or "sweeps over" the waters, the waters symbolizing the deep, the formless chaos. The Hebrew (רוּחַ, *rahaf*) has an emotional aspect to it. The Spirit isn't a thing; the Spirit is love. It's better to say that the Spirit "hovers" or "broods" over the creation. The Spirit broods the way a mother bird does over her young. That love isn't present in Stephen Crane's poem about the universe. It isn't present in that matter-of-fact, empty existence.

The **second** Person of the Trinity isn't so easily visible. Some see the evidence when God says, "Let us make humankind in our image." I think that may be stretching it a bit. We have here an example of the plural of excellence or the majestic plural, the royal "we." It's like when Queen Victoria would say, "We are not amused." She was only talking about one person!

Trinity isn't just the number three; it speaks about the nature of God. God is inherently a community. In Christian thinking, God is **by definition** a community. But this isn't "community" the way we sometimes think of it. It isn't a collection of individuals who just happen to be in the same vicinity. It certainly isn't a grudging or sullen community!

There's a term called "perichoresis." It comes from two Greek words meaning "around" and "to contain" or "to dance." It describes how the Persons of the Trinity share the lives of each other, continually interwoven in a vibrant intimacy of love, a dance of love. This is a love that is interwoven into the fabric of creation. God, **who is love**, has said of creation, "It is good."

God begins with a formless void, a big blob of nothingness, and begins calling out particularities, individual aspects of creation. God sets boundaries: light and dark, sea and sky, plants and animals, and so on. But things aren't just left alone. Like the Trinity, creation is set in interwoven, dynamic relationships. Sun and moon and stars have their cycles. Plants and animals are linked in complicated ways. And we are part of all of it.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (Jn 1:1, 3). That's what the gospel of John tells us. The epistle to the Hebrews

says that the Son “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (1:3).

We have the Word speaking and sustaining creation. On the scientific side, I’m reminded of emerging research that says information is what makes up the universe. In his book, *Decoding the Universe*, Charles Seife speaks of information, not as a concept, but as a physical reality that can be observed and measured. I’m no scientist, but I find the link between “Word” and “information” to be fascinating.

The divine Word has entered, and continues to enter, our reality in many different ways. Above all, the Word has entered our reality as Jesus Christ.

But the Word isn’t limited. It seems that the Word **also** chooses to enter our existence as information. (I say “chooses to enter” because God is under no compulsion.) This is something that is continuously going on. Seife speaks of “particles [that] are constantly winking in and out of existence.”² He doesn’t phrase it this way, because as a scientist, it falls outside the realm of what is strictly science, but creation is an ongoing process.

Of course, Genesis presents a vision of truth that is not fully appreciated, on the one hand, by science (and it would be unfair to expect it to), and on the other hand, by fundamentalism. It’s inevitable. Genesis doesn’t answer the questions that they are concerned with. And just as importantly, neither of the two can answer the questions that Genesis poses to them.

As evangelical writer Dan Clendenin puts it, “The exquisite poetry of Genesis, so [basic] to any view of reality that claims to be Christian, has been dismissed by critics and distorted by believers.” Referring to times when reporters ask politicians “if the world was created in six days,” he calls those “journalistic cheap [shots].” Still, that’s “how some Christians read the creation story. That’s like asking why a painting by Picasso or William Blake isn’t more ‘realistic.’”³

(That’s when I want to pull what’s left of my hair out and cry, “Because it isn’t **supposed** to be!”)

In speaking of poetry, Clendenin puts his finger on something. Unless we have an appreciation for poetic truth, even mythological truth, we won’t make very much headway in understanding the story of creation. Anyone familiar with the Bible knows that there is plenty of poetry in it. For example, all of the psalms are poetry. But to say that the Bible also contains mythology (which is how I would classify today’s text) tends to raise a red flag. Believe me, I speak from personal experience; I used to feel that way myself!

The idea that “mythology” equals “falsehood” has become entrenched in our minds. That’s too bad. For many, the very concept of “mythological truth” seems like a contradiction in terms. In our society, we too often prize literal terminology **alone** as a way of searching for, and expressing, the truth.

Still, who can deny that there’s an ocean of wisdom that simply cannot be communicated with cold facts and figures? (Try writing a love letter that way!) That is the power of poetry. That is the power of myth, which has been described as “something that is profoundly true at the deepest levels of life.”⁴

² Charles Seife, *Decoding the Universe* (New York: Viking, 2006), 205.

³ www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080512JJ.shtml

⁴ Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 5.

In the second creation story, the one that takes up most of chapter 2, God issues the invitation to be co-creators. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (v. 15). Clendenin notes, “The notion of our planet’s ongoing preservation is as important as its original creation. Most remarkable of all, says the Hebrew poet, when God finished his creative activity, he ‘rested.’ He then turned to humankind created in his very own image, and said, ‘here, now it is yours, to populate, steward, rule over, and manage, but not to plunder, neglect, or exploit.’”⁵

That’s what I meant earlier when I spoke of our text being an ongoing reality, something concerning every moment of our lives. God loves us and has given us the awesome privilege of co-creating. In Trinitarian fashion, God breathes the Word, inviting us to engage.

How are we at co-creating? How are we at tending the garden? How is our stewardship—of our resources, of ourselves? Do we damage ourselves? Do we poison ourselves and our world? Do we follow God’s lead in blessing creation, in building each other up? How willing are we to admit that we need help?

These are questions which take us to the depths of God’s Word—written and risen. There we find that the answer is to open ourselves to the power of the Trinity—God the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer.

We can re-imagine Stephen Crane’s poem: “Someone said to the universe: / ‘I exist!’ / ‘That is true,’ replied the universe, / ‘And the fact creates in me / A sense of obligation through those who co-create.’” So, how are we at co-creating?

⁵ www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20110613JJ.shtml