

A Sermon for
The Holy Trinity
May 18, 2008
Texts: Psalm 8
Genesis 1:1-2:4a

“O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! ...When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands, you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.” Psalm 8:1, 3-8

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day...The God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth... And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” Genesis 1:1-5, 26-28, 31

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. The God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness Night. And there was evening and morning the first day.” God would go on through six days of creating, speaking all things into existence, filling all living things with the breath of life, culminating in the creation of creatures in God’s own image, humankind. God blessed them, told

them to be fruitful and multiply, and to have dominion over all the living things God had made and continues to make. And looking at everything, God saw it was very good. The Hebrew word translated there as good is a word that carries a connotation of aesthetic goodness, not moral goodness. So perhaps a better way to translate it would be to say God saw everything that was created and it was very beautiful. That word, of course, was repeatedly used in this hymn of praise to our creator God. Every day of creating concluding with God surveying the work he had done and that it was beautiful.

This hymn of praise to God's beautiful creation is echoed in the hymnbook of the Bible, including today's psalm, Psalm 8, where the psalmist praises God for the awesome beauty of creation: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them?" Who hasn't stood and stared into the vastness and beauty of the night sky, when and where you can get a really good look at it, and not experienced that feeling of personal insignificance before the wonder of the universe? "O Lord, our Sovereign, maker of all this, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

This opening chapter of the Bible has become one of the most famous portions of the Holy Scriptures. It has been recited by astronauts circling the moon. It has been at the center of great controversies, creation vs. evolution, religion vs. science. But such controversies try to make the first chapter of Genesis into something it is not. It's not science, it's poetry, it's liturgy, it's metaphor.

Most scholars who have studied and researched the background of the Old Testament, the collection and assembly of the Old Testament books, believe that the creation story is part of what is called the "Priestly" literature, written in the 6th century BC, at the time of the Babylonian exile. Israel had been overrun and conquered by the Babylonian Empire, most of the leaders, priests, and many of the residents had been forced into exile in Babylon. This was a time of crisis, not only politically and socially, but religiously. The message the Babylonians brought was that the God of Israel was vanquished by the Babylonian gods. The God of Israel, indeed, was no God. The Babylonian mythology included an elaborate story of a cosmic war between gods in which their chief God, Marduk, was victorious, and from the remains of the defeated foe, Tiamat, formed the world.

In the middle of Babylon, surrounded with the temples to Marduk, the keepers of the Jewish faith were faced with trying to preserve and renew the devastated faith of the people of Israel. Out of that time was written a great deal of what becomes the Old Testament. Including a creation story praising the power and sovereignty of the God of Israel. A God whose power is such that there is no need to resort to cosmic battle, but merely the speaking of a word. God says it, and it is so. So, whose God is the true God? No other god has created in this way, only the God of Abraham and Jacob, the God of Israel.

The creation story was not written as a report of scientific processes, but as poetry describing the nature of our God. Our God who is the creator of all, our God who brings order where there is chaos. And what our God creates is beauty, the gift of creation. A gift of grace provided to all of the creatures placed in it to enjoy it and be fruitful in it, up to and including God's culminating creation, humankind. Created in God's gracious image, to have dominion over creation and care for it.

One of the great Lutheran theologians of the 20th century, Joseph Sittler, who died in 1987, was a pioneer in a sense. In the 1940's, he was writing, teaching, and pushing the church towards the development of a theology of, and a commitment to, caring for the natural world, the environment. One of the earliest environmentalists was a Lutheran. Sittler wrote about various needs, one of which was for people to get a new mindset regarding God's grace, to expand, enlarge, their understanding of what was included in God's gift of grace.

As Lutherans we are very focused on the grace embodied in Jesus Christ, the unconditional love from God exhibited in his life, death, and resurrection. This was the center of Luther's renewal of the gospel and the church. But, Sittler argued, we have allowed our understanding of grace to become so focused as to be confined to that one place, to Jesus and God's forgiveness experienced in him. We need to be reminded that God's grace fills the whole creation. He recalls that the early church fathers often wrote about "special grace" and "common grace". "Special grace" was that unique, historical, incomparable appearance of grace in Jesus Christ. It was Augustine who wrote that we are all born into a world of "common grace." Common not in the meaning of low or less valuable, but as available to everyone. This is the grace that you experience in the creation, the gift of beauty, of the provision of sustenance, the exhilaration of touching creaturely life all around.

God's grace is everywhere and our job is to appreciate it. The creation story, for Sittler, is one of the great expressions of God's grace in the scriptures. Common grace is found in all of the creations described. And our response to it should be the same as God's, in whose image we were created, appreciation for its beauty, its goodness. From this sense of appreciation Sittler drew his understanding of the word "dominion." God created us to have dominion over the creation, but that does not mean to dominate, destroy, and spoil. Rather, to have dominion in the way God does, with appreciation, with reverence, with enjoyment. It is from this place of appreciation and delight in creation's beauty, Sittler suggests, that the right use of nature arises. Abuse of nature is not compatible with a mindset of reverence and appreciation for God's gracious creation.

We need to broaden our understanding and appreciation of God's grace. This, I would suggest, is the purpose of the creation story, not to be a description of scientific investigation, but a poem of aesthetic appreciation and gratitude for God's graciousness. Not science, but embracing science, even elevating our appreciation of science, and deepening the wonder, awe, and beauty of what scientific inquiry continues to uncover, and fostering our appreciation for the grace in God's continuing creativity. O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth, in the heavens, in the moon and the stars you have placed there, in all the works of your hands. Amen