

Hospitality and Creation

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

Columbus, Ohio

October 16, 2011

Genesis 1 NRSV

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.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And 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.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then 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 all 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.”

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” 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.

Psalm 8 CEB

LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth!
You made your glory higher than heaven!
From the mouths of nursing babies you have laid a strong foundation
because of your foes, in order to stop vengeful enemies.
When I look up at your skies, at what your fingers made –
the moon and the stars that you set firmly in place –
what are human beings that you think about them;
what are human beings that you pay attention to them?
You’ve made them only slightly less than divine,
crowning them with glory and grandeur.
You’ve let them rule over your handiwork,
putting everything under their feet –
all sheep and all cattle, the wild animals too,
the birds in the sky, the fish of the ocean,
everything that travels the pathways of the sea.
LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth!

Revelation 22:1-5

The book of Revelation concludes with a guided tour of the New Jerusalem. An angel gives John a vision of the holy city from the ground up. Here’s how the tour wraps up.

[The angel] showed me a river. It’s the water of life, shining like crystal. It flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the city’s main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life. It bears twelve kinds of fruit, a different kind each month. And its leaves heal the nations.

There won’t be anything cursed any more. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on

their foreheads. There won't be night any more. And they won't need lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign for ages to come.

Sermon

First, a little perspective. The psalmist says, "When I look up at your skies, at what your fingers made – the moon and the stars that you set firmly in place – what are human beings that you think about them; what are human beings that you pay attention to them?" (Psalm 8:3-4).

In the ancient world, the sky was thought to be a dome stretched high above the earth. Under that vast dome, the psalmist wondered, "God, why do you pay us any mind?" If the psalmist only knew the half of it!

There's a scale model of the solar system on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. On this model, the sun is a sphere about the size of a grapefruit. Fifty feet away is the earth. On this model, the earth is a sphere about the size of the ball in a ballpoint pen. The moon is an even smaller sphere, about an inch and a half from the earth. On this model, the outer limit of our solar system, represented by the once and former planet Pluto, is a third of a mile away.

That's our solar system. But suppose you wanted to represent the nearest star. Where would it be? On this model, it would be almost two and a half thousand miles away in California! Two and a half thousand miles to the nearest star. But on this model, the farthest any human being has ever travelled is the one and half inches to the moon.¹ If the psalmist only knew the half of it!

There is something daunting about the night sky, something daunting in the sheer scale and vastness of it. So when Abraham's imagination needed to stretch, God told him to look up at the night sky and count the stars. Go to a very dark place, away from the light pollution of nearby cities and towns, and with the naked eye you can see a few thousand stars. That's a lot of stars!

But then do this. Take a grain of sand between your thumb and forefinger. Hold it out at arm's length. Notice how much of the night sky that grain of sand blocks from view. Not very much, right? In a piece of sky that tiny, the Hubble telescope sees more than fifty galaxies. Not fifty stars. Fifty galaxies. Fifty galaxies, each containing millions, billions, even trillions of stars! All in a piece of night sky that you can hide with a grain of sand.²

"When I look up at your skies, at the stars that you set in place . . ." If the psalmist only knew the trillionth of it!

The earth, our home, is a tiny speck in a universe that is vast beyond comprehension with unnumbered stars and planets and moons and galaxies. And God is the lord of every last bit of that universe. And this God, whose glory is beyond the boundless universe – this God, for some reason, pays attention to us. Amazing.

¹This model is described in Jeffrey Bennett, *Beyond UFOs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 42-48.

²Bennett, pp. 13-15.

Second, some context. These days the biblical creation stories have become a focus of religious and political argument. Some people dismiss those stories out of hand as empty mythology. Some people take the same stories as a scientifically accurate journal of unfolding events. Those are the extremes. And oddly they share a common feature. Both of the extremes fail to take the biblical creation stories on their own terms as expressive literature rather than as factual or fictional eyewitness reports.

And this is not an abstract, out-there-somewhere debate. At our recent classis meeting, we approved the retirement of Clay Libolt. Thirty years ago, Clay couldn't get ordained in the Christian Reformed Church. His literary reading of the biblical creation stories – literary rather than literal – his literary reading of those stories was considered out of bounds.

And the issue keeps coming back. Calvin College president Gaylen Byker spoke to our denominational synod a few months ago. He warned about a great threat to the college and to the church. In particular, he had two Calvin professors in his sights. Those professors had been thinking about human genome studies and their implications.

As far as the Christian tradition is concerned, two of those implications stand out. The first is that today's human population did not come from an original human couple. In other words, there were no Adam and Eve. Instead there were thousands of Adams and Eves. The second implication, which flows from the first, is that church dogma about the fall and original sin needs to be re-imagined.

This is what Byker was warning us about. And by now, one of those professors has been muzzled, and the other has been sent packing.³ I think instead we would do well to listen to Stanley Hauerwas, who learned early on that “to be a Christian meant that you could never protect yourself from the truth.”⁴ When the truth challenges dogma, so much the worse for dogma.

Third, some clarification. Genesis 1 is not a scientific report. Genesis 2 and 3 is not an eyewitness account. And Revelation 21 and 22 is neither. What we have in these biblical texts is literature. Literature intended to evoke awe and wonder. Literature intended to sustain faith and hope. Literature intended to give understanding.

To read these biblical texts not literarily but literally is misguided. It's misguided to read them literally and then to dismiss them as hopelessly out of touch with reality. That's what the current crop of new atheists like to do. It's also misguided to read these chapters literally and then to dismiss conclusions that come from a careful examination of stars and rocks and fossils and DNA. That's what the creation museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, does.

Biblical creation accounts do not reveal the processes of creation. And they don't reveal creation's timetable. Instead they reveal the nature of creation. By whatever means the universe came into being, it is a work of God. By whatever means the earth exists, it is a work of God. And by whatever means human beings came to stand on the earth, we too are a work of God.

³*The Banner*, October 2011, pp. 12-13.

⁴Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 11.

Beyond that, whatever the timetable of our genesis, whoever our paleological ancestors may have been, we human beings find ourselves uniquely related to God and uniquely responsible before God. “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it,” says Psalm 24 (v. 1). Yet God has put all the earth “under our feet” (Psalm 8:6). We also find ourselves necessarily related to all creation and, especially, unavoidably related to one another. We are made in the image of God, made that way together (cf. Genesis 1:27).

Which brings us as advertised, at last, to hospitality. Rather than to read Genesis 1 as a play-by-play account or as a documentary filmmaker’s script of just how things came to be, let’s notice how the chapter is put together and see what that tells us.

To begin with, there is a formless, water-world. Then come six days of activity. For the first three days, the creation is given form. A series of distinctions is put in place. On the first day, day is distinguished from night. On the second day, sky is distinguished from waters. And on the third day, dry land is distinguished from seas.

For the next three days, those distinct spaces are populated. On the fourth day, the sun lends its shine to the day, while the moon and stars become nightlights. On the fifth day, fish stir up the waters, while birds take flight and cut through the sky. On the sixth day, animals begin to roam over and root about in the dry land. And after a pause for effect, as if this is what everything has been waiting for, what everything has been moving toward, the good earth welcomes the gaze of humanity.

This is a story of hospitality. God the generous host makes room for and welcomes his guests. Each day, a fitting home is established and its inhabitants are welcomed. First, day and night are prepared – prepared for the sun, the moon, and the stars, which are welcomed to their assigned tasks. Then sky and seas are prepared – prepared for butterflies and birds, for sharks and anemones, which are welcomed and encouraged to be fruitful. Last, dry ground is prepared – prepared for apes, antelopes, and people.

People are a special case. God welcomes people as partners in the work of creation. Late on the sixth day, the creation remains unfinished. Its potential is in place, but not yet realized. And the key factor in unfolding the possibilities is the presence of human beings.

Bearing the image of God, we exercise dominion over the earth and its creatures. Not that the earth is ours to control or to exploit or to abuse. Rather the earth is not yet all that it can be, not yet all that it will be. And we human beings have a task to work as agents of God to lead the earth into its intended future. In our tradition, we call this the Cultural Mandate.

It’s from the creation stories as literature that we learn our place in the grand scheme of things. Yes, the earth is a tiny planet, invisible on the vast canvas of our expanding universe. But just as the sun, the moon, and the stars have their task – to shine their light day and night – just as they have their task, we too have our task. To expend creative energy, to unleash imaginative love, to explore, to uncover, to build. All as servants of God. This is who we are.

It’s a theme in the Bible’s first chapter. It’s a theme in the Bible’s last chapters. In the beginning, the Bible introduces us to a creation that’s only starting to take shape. At the end, the Bible shows us a creation that’s reaching its goal. And that goal is, of all things, a great city.

This is what human beings are about. We build homes. We build villages. We build towns. We build cities. When the Bible's final vision is a great city, that validates the initial vision of human beings welcomed into partnership with God to unfold the earth's possibilities.

And the theme of hospitality, the hospitality that welcomes us at the beginning, reaches its climax in the final vision of the Bible. In that vision, the heavenly city comes to rest on the earth. Then God welcomes humanity into the city to live there with God as God's people, to live in the light, not of sun, moon, and stars, but of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And there is life and there is flourishing for ages to come.

This is what creation is all about. This is where creation, our corner of it at least, is going. And this we learn from no play-by-play account. This we learn from no scientific report. Instead we learn it from literature, literature that overflows with meaning, literature given to us by God.