

IN THE BEGINNING...GOD

Trinity Sunday

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Text: Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

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.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

SERMON

Some years ago, Judy and I were at Ghost Ranch, which is a Presbyterian retreat center located in Abiqui, NM, about 50 miles northwest of Santa Fe. There is the main campus with numerous buildings, but we were staying out at Casa del Sol, an old hacienda style house about a mile away. There were about five couples staying there, all pastors and their spouses for a week of clergy renewal. It was early spring, so while the days were warm and pleasant, the nights in the high desert would still get quite chilly. So most evenings were spent around a crackling fire in the fireplace of the living room.

One night, one of the group stepped out into the courtyard for a little fresh air, and returned very quickly. “Everyone! You have got to come and see this!” He said. “What is it?” we asked. He wouldn’t say, but insisted that we had to come. Well, we were all comfortable and cozy and reluctant to move, but he was adamant. So we dragged ourselves out of the overstuffed easy chairs and went out into the cold night air. All the exterior lights in the building had been turned off, and since the lights were low in the living room there was almost no artificial light. There was no moon and out there in the clear, dry desert air, with no other light source, the Milky Way was absolutely brilliant in the night sky above. We didn’t come all at once, some had gone to get a sweater or a jacket, but everyone who stepped out into the courtyard had the same reaction, “Whoa!!!” And then we had nothing more to say.

I don’t know if you have ever experienced anything like this. It is difficult here in Iowa, because even out in the country there are lights from nearby towns or farms. Even a street light, miles away, can keep you from seeing the stars clearly. I have heard that up in the Boundary Waters in northern Minnesota on a clear night, you sometimes can see the Milky Way like this. But it is a profound and overwhelming experience. Out there on the open desert, underneath a sky just glowing with starlight, I had something of the opposite feeling of claustrophobia. I felt wide open, extremely small and almost untethered, adrift in a vast and infinite universe. It was a bit unsettling even frightening, but also a bit of a relief. Suddenly all the troubles and worries of this world seemed completely unimportant and insignificant.

Last Sunday was Pentecost, when the church celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit, and so from now until Advent we are in what is sometimes called Ordinary Time in the church calendar. The first Sunday of Ordinary Time has also been designated as Trinity Sunday. The Presbyterian *Companion to the Book of Common Worship* describes Trinity Sunday in this way: “Unlike other festivals in the church’s liturgical calendar, Trinity Sunday centers on a doctrine of the church, rather than an event. It celebrates the unfathomable mystery of God’s being as Holy Trinity. It is a day of adoration and praise of the one, eternal, incomprehensible God.”

It is that word “incomprehensible” that struck me when I read this. I have often referred to that wonderful quote from Martin Luther when he said, “To deny the doctrine of the Trinity is a threat to your salvation. However, to try to understand the doctrine of the Trinity is a threat to your sanity.” And because this is a day that centers on a doctrine and not an event, and on top of that, it is an incomprehensible doctrine that threatens your sanity, what exactly should we do on Trinity Sunday?

Rather than trying to explain the Trinity, I think what we should try to do is something along the lines of stepping out on a perfectly clear desert night and staring up into the Milky Way. You can talk all you like about constellations and light years and supernovae and black holes and Einstein's theory of relativity. All is very helpful from a scientific point of view. The data and experiments help us gain knowledge and insight into how things work. But it is not the same as the experience I have described when the sheer beauty and vastness of the universe is there right in front of you. The Trinity in some way needs to be experienced not explained, no matter how inadequate that experience might be.

The lectionary readings for Trinity Sunday always include our text for today, the opening verses of the Bible, the story of creation. I will come back to why in just a moment, but before I get to that it is worth mentioning that many approach this story as an astronomer might look at the Milky Way or as a theologian might try to analyze some critical Christian doctrine. It is easy to make it into some sort of intellectual process and miss what is really going on. Many see this text as a battleground between science and faith, and that you must choose one or the other. They might argue that a scientific rational mind cannot see these verses as anything more than a fairy tale, or that true Christians must believe the details of what is described in this first chapter of the Bible as literally true and if they don't then the remaining 1,187 chapters cannot be true.

I won't say too much about this other than it is like the difference between looking at a picture from the Hubble telescope and studying the painting "Starry Night" by the Impressionistic painter Vincent Van Gogh. Both are a representation of reality. Both have their own distinct value and both are beautiful. But it would be silly to think for some reason you have to choose one over the other.

So what does this first chapter of Genesis have to do with the doctrine of the Trinity? Well, the book of Genesis begins with those familiar words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." What most people do not realize is that in the original Hebrew the word for God throughout the chapter, as well as in many parts of the Bible, is in a plural form. You could almost translate that verse as "In the beginning, Gods created the heavens and the earth." Now there is a debate as to what this means. In some forms of Hebrew nouns in a plural form can mean intensity or power. So then the translation would be something like, "In the beginning, the most powerful One created the heavens and the earth." But many Christian scholars and theologians see the first three verses of the Bible as the first hint of the Trinitarian formula with God the Father, the Creator, working through the wind or Spirit that broods over the waters and through the spoken Word, the Logos, when God says, "Let there be light..." And all of creation comes into existence.

This idea is developed further in verse 26, where again the plural is used when God says, "Let **us** make humankind in **our** image, according to **our** likeness..." Who is God speaking to when God says this? Some Christian theologians have speculated that this is a conversation going on within the three persons of the Trinity. It should be pointed out that Jewish scholars who are non-Trinitarian would not agree with this interpretation. They would see it more like the British monarchs who do not refer to themselves in the first person. The queen never says "I am doing this," but "We are doing this..."

But I think Christian and Jewish theologians alike would agree that the first chapter of Genesis is important, not because of what it says about how the universe came into existence, but because of what it says about God; what God is like and how God acts. So what does it say about God? Well, let's begin with the statement that the earth was a "formless void." Now that word "formless" is an interesting one. In the Hebrew it can mean something that is empty or without any kind of order, but the most common idea is something that lacks a purpose or a reason for existence. This makes sense when you connect that word with the Hebrew word "create." This word does mean to make something or put something together or shape something. It is a common Hebrew word found in many places throughout the Scriptures. But almost always it is used to make something for a specific purpose. It is not just doodling or splashing around paint or squeezing clay into various shapes. It is making something to function in a particular way, to make a pot for cooking, or to write a story to tell about the brave hero, or to prepare a meal that will be absolutely delicious.

Creation then did not just happen on a whim, when God was bored and didn't have anything else to do. God creates all things intentionally, for a purpose. God transforms the formless, purposeless void into something that has a direction and a particular function. This is what is going on when again and again we are told that God saw that what had been created was good. It now was able to do something useful and deliberate. This carries all the way through to the end when human beings are made, everything is complete and God says that it is not just good but very good. All is functioning as it is supposed to function.

So what is the purpose of creation? What was God trying to do by making this infinite universe with all its beauty and wonder. The key is in a part of the story we often skim over quickly. It is found in these verses: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done."

I don't know if you have ever really thought about those words, but if you take them at face value they seem rather absurd. God finished this mind blowing act of creation by resting? What does that mean? Did God get tired after working so hard? On the seventh day of creation did God kick back in some kind of heavenly hammock with a cold glass of cosmic lemonade? That sounds a little strange, doesn't it?

But it doesn't mean rest in terms of taking a nap. In the ancient world, people believed that the gods only "rested" in the places where they resided, often up on a sacred mountain, or perhaps in a volcano or even in the ocean. The gods left the places where they resided to do some specific task, to go to war, or to fix some disaster, or to show their power and authority. When they were resting it meant that everything was safe, and secure and things were running as they should be.

So the Hebrews would have seen the six days of creation as God setting things up in their proper order and function. Creation was now prepared so that God could now rest or reside with God's creation and with God's people. The seventh day was the whole purpose of creation. It was an "Emmanuel" moment. God is with us. God has come to rest with us, reside with us, be connected with us. As one writer put it, the first six days are about God building a house. The seventh day is about it becoming a home. Furthermore, God is delighted with it all. God calls it very good.

Now, the remaining 1,187 chapters of the Bible are all about how we human beings messed everything up, and are continuing to do so to this very day. But God does not let us go. God continues to work at straightening out our mess, connecting with us, coming to be with us, to reside and rest with us. This theme carries all the way through to the last chapter in Revelation where a promise is given that the day will come when God will be with us and there will be no tears or sorrow.

So the story of God creating the universe is not some sort of preposterous ancient fairy tale, but neither is it a literal description of how things came to be. It offers an insight into what God is like and what God has been attempting to do throughout all of existence. God is intentional and creates for the purpose of establishing relationships. This shouldn't surprise us because one of the first things we learn about God back in Sunday School is that God is love. Before anything was created before there was even light or darkness, God was and is and will be love. That love was in God's very being, God's very nature. There was love within God; love between the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I said at the beginning that we should not strive to explain the Trinity, but experience the Trinity. We need to experience this love of God found within God's very being. Let me close with a quote from one of my favorite writers and theologians, Frederick Buechner. He says that God continues to try to tell each of us something like this: "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are*, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you." When I start to ponder that, all I can say is "Whoa!" and then not say anything more... Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.