

1st Sunday after Pentecost
June 18 19, 2011
Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a
Learning from the creation story

What are your childhood memories of summer? Family vacations – camping or visiting relatives? Playing street games with neighborhood friends? Mine are of endless hours roaming the countryside – on bike or on foot, exploring gravel roads, woods, fields, swimming in the county park lake. Running down rows of field corn way over my head, hiding between the furrows of fields plowed for the first time. Watching stars at night. Catching lightning bugs. Learning how to whistle back to bob whites and having them call back to me. I wouldn't be surprised if for many of us, our first, maybe not explicit, but no less real connection to God, happened without us naming it as a religious experience. As kids, God's earth was our playground, our science lab, our Playstation. Even with less free time in fall, winter, and spring, most of us remember collecting colorful leaves, playing in the snow, hearing the lake ice moan on cold nights.

This Sunday is the only one in the lectionary cycle dedicated to a theological concept. Most years I take up the challenge to make the Trinity relevant and exciting. This year, after 6 months of the church year – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter – devoted to the second person of the Trinity, and one big Sunday, Pentecost, celebrating the Holy Spirit, this year the reading from Genesis, celebrating God as creator, got my attention. So, I guess we're approaching the Trinity one character at a time, instead of simultaneously.

Aren't they amazingly beautiful words from Genesis! What beautiful poetry Dave read. Today's reading is the first of two creation stories in Genesis. Two versions of the Israel's creation story told at different times in its history, each with a different emphasis. I had hoped to have a slideshow to go along with Dave's reading, showing us amazing photography of God's creation. That didn't work out, so I hope you can make your own mental slideshow of flowers, mountains, snow, rainbows, birds, forests, canyons, coral reefs, and anything you've seen that proves to you that God is creator.

Today's reading from Genesis is central to our faith. After all, for anyone who sets off to read the Bible cover to cover, we know that they got at least this far. These opening chapters of Genesis are a confession of faith. We could read them during the service like we used to recite the Apostle's Creed. The poetry we heard today was written at a time when Israel's life was turned upside down, and they needed to remind themselves that no matter what was happening at the time, God was in charge, because after all, God had created all that is. These two creation stories were never meant to be an historical account. They're not notes taken as creation happened. They are so much more.

In college I was a biology and religion major. To me they were a wonderful harmony of learning – to learn about the miracle of bilateral symmetry, photosynthesis, yes, and evolution. To me those are all testimonies to me of God's creative powers. There are scientists who write about faith, and theologians who write about science; Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Stephen Jay Gould, Lewis Thomas, and Sallie McFague.

I still remember my college Bible professor, Dixon Slingerland, explaining the creation stories to us. He started by saying that the Bible should really start with Exodus story. It was only when those slaves from Egypt got safely to the other side of the sea, away from the Egyptians, and spent some time in the wilderness, that they began to have a sense that they were a people, and more importantly, that something bigger than themselves was and had been keeping them together. Then a few hundred years later, held captive in Babylon, surrounded by a very different understanding of how the world works, politically and theologically, did they begin to talk amongst themselves, saying that the God that got them out of Egypt, fed them in the wilderness, brought them to the promised land, and even stayed with them in a foreign land, that God MUST have even created them and all that was. The Hebrews developed a very different story of creation because of their unique experience and history with their God. The creation story that came from the Jewish faith and culture was told by word of mouth, elaborated upon through many generations of retelling, and was finally written down at a critical time in Israel's history. Many scholars believe this story took shape during the time that the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon (586 - 539 BCE), or shortly after they

returned to Israel. It was a time when people needed to hope and be reminded who was really boss. In response to their captors, who insisted that their rulers held all power, the exiles told a story about their God and a relationship that transcended human rulers. It was their creation story and it is ours today.

Our story says that there is one god, not created, but eternal. Our story says that God made order out of chaos. Our story says that God created with a loving spirit, not in a mythic war or a murderous battle for power against other gods. Our God declared that all of creation is good. Later our story says that God created eternal laws. So, there was no longer a need for sacrifices to gods, or fertility rituals to bring spring rains. We can trust and depend on God's established natural order. We can depend upon God for our life. Finally, our story tells us that God is with us and for us. Our God is not somewhere else, far away, disinterested in our human condition. God has made us in God's image. We are placed in this garden of earth to keep it and care for it, and to be companions to God.

Our story of creation isn't about science. It's about God. Theology told in poetry. Beautiful words and lofty notions of a God who fiercely loves us and beautifully created us, humans and amoebas and zebras and birch trees. It is a statement of faith and tells us the truth – not about how, but about who. In the beginning – God – created – and it was good. Biology, astrophysics, chemistry, genetics, all offer amazing companion information to this story, helping us get a glimpse into the unfathomable complexity of life that God created; wonders like photophosphorescent plants and animals, migration, tectonic plate shift, and pheromones; smells that connect us to the one we love. We've learned lots about God's creation, and there's so much more to learn. A Lutheran pastor whose blog I read this week used a wonderful analogy to describe the relationship between science and the biblical creation story: The stories in Genesis were not meant to be a science; rather they were written as an ode to the creator. It is like looking at a beautiful tapestry. The Bible looks at the design in the front and comments on its beauty, science goes behind the tapestry and looks at the intricacies of the weaving from the back, trying to figure out how it was woven. For either side to deny what is on the other side of the tapestry is a shame. One side would not exist

without the other. To deny the other side is to miss the beautiful interplay between beauty and wonder.

As I reveled in the creation story this week, and thought about disagreements between Christians on how to understand it, it occurred to me that whether we understand it as literal or theological, we all should take it very seriously. That God created. That God called creation good. That God gave us a responsibility to care for it. That we are but one part of a delicate balance of plants, animals, atmosphere, and so much more. Why is it then, that as people of faith, fundamentalist or not, that we don't treat anything that harms the earth as sinful? From gumwrappers out the car window, to melting polar ice caps. I wanted to also have pictures for us of environmental disasters – both one-time events and chronic ones. You know what I mean – shaving off mountain tops for coal, Chernobyl, the coal ash sludge leak in Tennessee, big city pollution, road side trash, toxic waste dumps, the gulf oil spill. Do we even have to wonder what God thinks about what we've done? The line from our reading keeps ringing in my ears, "And God saw that it was good."

On this seventh day of creation, this Sabbath day of rest, this Trinity Sunday, let us celebrate our amazing God who lives among us in the Holy Spirit, who loves us in the person of the living Christ, and whose incomprehensible power and wisdom created us and all that is. And is still creating. Let us celebrate and give thanks to God our creator. This amazing earth was, and still is, for many of us an important part of coming to know God – in the miracle of fireflies and waves, tadpoles becoming frogs, rainbows and shooting stars. And may we also have the courage, this day and every day, to find some ways to change our lives and our society to protect this amazing creation. To continue to destroy God's creation is sinful on a global scale. God has asked for our help. May we be the companions God created us to be.