

The Creative Trinity

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a
Trinity Sunday – June 7, 2020
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

Trinity Sunday each year gives the church an opportunity to ponder the implications of God's triune nature – a creative fellowship of love between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit – for us, who are created in the image of that triune, creative fellowship of love. Our text for today, which Rachel just shared creatively and dramatically with us, is the first creation story from the book of Genesis. And what this text has to say to us, in June of 2020 as we are in the midst of a global pandemic and in the midst of massive unrest and soul-searching as an American society, is that *God's creative love is at work in the midst of chaos.*

According to Genesis 1, God's creative work began when the earth was a 'formless void.' The Hebrew words for 'formless void' are the *tohu wabohu*, which refers to a pre-existent, watery chaos that may represent all those forces that threaten the viability, sustainability, and peacefulness of life. The image of the *tohu wabohu* is a powerful image that may resonate for us whenever we find ourselves facing some overwhelming, chaotic circumstance that threatens to overwhelm us. Genesis 1 says that God is not overwhelmed by *tohu wabohu*, and in fact, is at work within it to bring forth the new creation.

Many scholars believe that Genesis 1 was put together during the time of the Babylonian exile, when Jews had been deported from their homeland and subjugated by the Babylonian empire. In that situation, our Jewish ancestors were themselves in a context of subjugation and chaos, where they were being told that their God had been summarily defeated and rendered ineffective by the gods of Babylon. The Babylonians had their own story about creation, known as the *Enuma elish*, in which the Babylonian god Marduk killed and slaughtered the goddess Tiamat, and out of her violent death, Marduk created the heavens and earth. That is to say, the Babylonian story – which would have surrounded the Jews who were in exile – said that creation and order were brought forth by violence and domination. Domination ... and violence are always a temptation for us, when we want to make things go our way and get things under control.

But Israel told a different story. The God of Israel, who our ancestors announced was the true and holy God, brought forth creation, not by violence, but by a Word. "Let there be light." "Let there be a dome." "Let there be..." The God of the Bible creates order, not through violence, but through divine presence in the midst of the chaos, and steadily, joyfully, brings forth new creation. Now, some will say that this is just pretty poetry, but the real world only really responds to raw power. But the Bible and our faith want to insist that raw power and violence *will not* lead to new life; only the power of

love – creative, non-violent, patient, steady, persistent, suffering love – leads to new life. Our responses in the world *must* be nonviolent if they are to match God’s own work; our impulses towards violence, however tempting, must be restrained.

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With the creation of humankind in verse 26, biblical faith communicates a core teaching, central to our faith, and essential for the moment in which we find ourselves. “Let us make humankind in our image,” God said. “God created humankind *in God’s image.*”

We should notice what the text does not say. It does not say, “God created the people of Israel in God’s image.” It does not say, “God created Christians in God’s image.” It does not say, “God created one race, or one nation, or one religion of people in God’s image.” It says, “God created *humankind* in God’s image.”

In its original context, drawn together during the Babylonian exile, this text would have been a resounding affirmation of the dignity and inherent value of the Jewish exiles. The Babylonian empire was telling them that they were nobodies. They were losers. They were nobodies, whose lives could be violated at will, uprooted from their homeland, and put to use for the imperial machine of Babylon. This is the message that the world routinely gives to poor people – you are not as valuable as those who are rich, your life doesn’t matter, you’re expendable, you have value only if you contribute to the world’s economic interests.

But Genesis 1 says, right at the beginning of the Bible, that is not true. You are created in the image of God, even if the world does not respect you. You belong here, even if the world pushes you to the side. You bear the image and the likeness of God, and no one in the world can take that away from you. The Bible begins with the deepest affirmation of the value of every human life, including our own. Genesis 1 is foundational for a healthy self-understanding in our world.

It is also the case that this text affirms the value of the other, in this case, the *Babylonians*, those who were their imperial overlords. The text could have said that God created the people of Israel, but not the awful Babylonians. The text teaches that the Babylonians were created in the image of God, every bit as much as the people of Israel. The Bible begins with the deepest affirmation of the inherent value and dignity of everyone, every opponent, even every enemy we may have.

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In conversations this past week with African American clergy colleagues in our area, I was struck by the pain in their voices, as they spoke of the dehumanization that they were observing and experiencing; as they talked of their fear for their children and

their grandchildren; as they talked of their anger about the killing of George Floyd and others; *and* as they talked of their desire to partner with white folks to work towards healing and justice and God's new creation. In the weeks and months and years to come, there will be work for us to do in this regard, there will be opportunities for us – individually and collectively – to listen, opportunities for us to learn, opportunities for us to speak, opportunities for us to act.

As we more deeply appreciate and integrate the foundational teachings of Genesis 1 into our lives, God will give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to embrace, the God-given dignity of those who are different from us, as well as our own God-given dignity. We will, more and more, be able to honor the image of God in those who are racially different, economically different, politically different, religiously different from us. We may expect that this will require us to learn many new things. It will also require us to *unlearn* many things, to let go of old assumptions and practices that no longer serve us well. There may be times where it feels like we are in the midst of the *tohu wabohu*, a formless and chaotic and threatening void. But the news of Trinity Sunday is that God's *creative love is at work in the midst of chaos*. To God and to God alone be the praise, honor, and glory, now and forever. Amen.