

THE TWO DIRECTIONS OF CREATION

Genesis 1:26-31

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on June 11, 2017, Trinity Sunday, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a preaching theme for multiple Sundays entitled “In the Beginning.”

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.

Introduction to the Series

Most summers at Westminster, I preach a series of sermons on a particular character, a book of the Bible, or a set of theological questions. I will follow this pattern this summer, with three slight changes.

- First, on most Sundays, the Biblical texts will come from the Old Testament selections from the *lectionary*, as opposed to texts I have chosen to match a theme.
- Second, the series and its focus will extend into October, with one or two exceptions.
- And third, because the sermons will be drawn primarily from Genesis and Exodus, they will feature events or people with whom many of us have at least a passing familiarity.

In many of these sermons, I will take one Old Testament figure – or even one incident in that person’s life – that is deeply revealing. I hope that each sermon will have for you something old and something new, something familiar and something you have never before encountered, something you learn, or relearn, about faith and life, about self and other, about humanity and God.

The series is entitled “In the Beginning” because it will focus not only on the stories from our faith concerning the origins of humanity, but also on the beginnings of wisdom so crucial to us today and the search for which is perhaps what draws us here Sunday after Sunday.

Finally, by way of introduction, I will be drawing on the contemporary scholarship of Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg,¹ a Jewish scholar who combines insightful study of the Biblical text and centuries of Jewish reflection on the text known as Midrash, with her knowledge of Freud, Shakespeare, Kafka, and 19th and 20th century American literature. More than any scholar I have read in recent years, Zornberg draws from the Biblical text depths of human experience that more often than not draw me closer to God when I read them. It is that closeness that I hope you will experience as you do what you do so well and with such discipline: listen to the preaching of the Word.

Let us pray: *O Lord, Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. I have sworn, and I will perform it; may it lead me and those who hear to serve Thee in the world Thou hast created. In the name of Jesus Christ, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.*

I.

When we read the first creation story in Genesis, we find ourselves in a vertical worldview:

... God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light...²

And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together... and let the dry land appear.' And it was so.³ ...

Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation...And it was so....⁴

And God, said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals...' And it was so.⁵

Within this tiered worldview of the sixth century BCE out of which it this creation story emerged, we find ourselves looking *upward* at a resolute, powerful, majestic, transcendent, creative God, who acts in *solitude* through his spoken word to create the world *below* and then bless what he creates.

*God said...
Let there be...
It was so....*

The movement of creation proceeds *downward* on the part of God while we stand *below*, looking *upward* in awe. Says Psalm 8:

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*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,
mortals that you care for them?⁶*

¹ The work that will most inform this series is Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995). Later sermons will draw on other works from Zornberg, and they will be duly noted.

² Genesis 1:3.

³ Genesis 1:9.

⁴ Genesis 1:11.

⁵ Genesis 1:24.

⁶ Psalm 8:1, 3-4.

Yet even within this predominantly *vertical* story, there are hints of *horizontality* (if that is word!).

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.

Words like “formless void,” “darkness,” “deep,” “wind,” and “waters” are not usually expressions of *verticality*. They attempt to describe matters primarily *horizontal*, spreading out or flowing.

In addition, God creates the “waters” to “bring forth *swarms* of living creatures,”⁷ “birds [to] fly... *across*...the sky,”⁸ and “everything that creeps” to “[creep] *upon* the ground.”⁹ “Swarming,” “flying across the sky,” “creeping upon the ground” – these images are primarily *horizontal*.

And finally notice that when God concludes his creative activity by creating humanity, God says “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, after *our* likeness.”

“Us.” “Our.” “Our.”

- Is God referring to a council of gods?
- Is God consulting a heavenly court or cabinet?
- Is this an ancient version of a Presbyterian committee, wrought in heaven, still alive and well on earth?

“Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness...”

Scholars often say that this “us-ness” is a remnant of ancient mythology that predates the magisterial monotheism of God, monotheism to which Jews and (even with the Trinity) Christians, hold. But even within the *verticality* of monotheism, this *horizontal* image of God is apparent several places within the very text of creation: “Let *us* make,” “in *our* image,” “according to *our* likeness.” Thus, even within the description of God as *above*, a *horizontal* dimension appears, a nod to a *communal* relationship, even within God’s own person.

And this *communal* dimension is brought home in the culminating act of creation:

So God created *humankind* in his image,
In the image of God he created *them*,
Male and female he created *them*.

Looking at this, we can conclude that the direction of creation is not only *vertical*, but it is also *horizontal*, *communal*. To be “in the image of God” is to be in relationship with the people around us. To be “in the image of God” is to be *communal*. “He created *them*.”

II.

These early texts from Genesis give us a picture of the way things are intended to be under God. As we absorb them, we cannot help but conclude that in God’s image, human beings are intended to be in some sort of *community* with one another. *To be human is to be in God’s image, and to be in God’s image is to be in community.*

⁷ Genesis 1:20.

⁸ Genesis 1:20.

⁹ Genesis 1:25.

From time to time I am asked to read at funerals the 19th century British poem “Invictus,” by William Ernest Henley. It is a wonderful and stirring poem, that moves me every time I read it. It is especially fitting for the funeral of one who has been a *military hero* or person of *great individual accomplishment*. Individuals as diverse as Churchill, Mandela, James Stockdale, President Obama, and Burmese resistance leader Aung San Suu Kyi have cited it.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

As influential as the poem is, it bears witness primary to one aspect of what it means to be created “in the image of God”: the strength of the individual, the “unconquerable soul” of whom the individual is “captain,” especially when challenged or under duress. The primary image of the poem is that of an unfettered individual standing upright – *vertically* – against whatever “chance” and “circumstance” bring.

But even within the heroic individualism of the poem, there is a *nod* to something beyond the individual strength. The poem refers to “whatever gods [there] may be.” The vertical solitude of the hero of the poem, who is captain of his or her own soul, is an image that not even God ultimately maintains in describing his own efforts in creation.

- “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image,” God says.
- Not: “Let *Me* make humankind in *My* image.”

The God who begins creation in *verticality* moves ever so quickly in the direction of *the horizontal*. The God who begins creation alone moves quickly into community within his own being. The God who creates us creates us “in his [*communal*] image.”

“...in the image of God, he created *them*.”

Zornberg writes:

... To have ... an equivalent Other,
With whom one must reckon,

Who limits the grandeur of one's solitude,
With whom one speaks and struggles
And [even] brings offspring into the world...
Is [to live] on the *horizontal* plane...

She quotes an ancient commentator:

...Humanity as alone and autonomous
Is "not good"...
[We] need to live face to face with the Other,
[Face to face with each other,]
Dancing to the choreography of [our]...freedom.

It is in community – "face to face *with* [each] Other" – that we are most "in the image of God" in which we have been created.

III.

I was reminded of the power and importance of community on the recent trip to Israel our church sponsored with two synagogues and another Presbyterian Church.

One afternoon we took a cruise on an open decked boat across the Sea of Galilee. Our group of forty-one, equally divided between Christians and Jews, was the only group on the boat that day, and it was a stunningly beautiful day, both sunny and mild.

A few minutes into the excursion, I was called forward in front of the captain's cabin to read over the PA system two passages of scripture which occurred in the life of Christ on that very Sea.

- The story of Jesus stilling the storm¹⁰
- And the story of Jesus walking on water.¹¹

It was moving to read these stories on the Sea on which they occurred.

In a few minutes, the Captain's voice came over the PA system: "We normally do this for American groups." A deckhand proceeded to hoist the American flag and the American National Anthem began to play over the system. Everyone in our group stood, removed caps, placed hands over hearts, and joined in singing, albeit off key.

I have thought about this event several times, and it has led me to reflect on the different communities of which I am part and the way many of them were interlocking on that trip:

- The community of marriage to my spouse who co-led the trip
- The community of friendship I have with Rabbi Jack Moline, also a co-leader
- The community of this congregation, Westminster, of whom nearly twenty were on the trip
- The community of Jews and Christians, Presbyterians and Catholics who formed on the trip

¹⁰ Mark 4:35-41.

¹¹ Mark 6:45-56.

- The community of Alexandria and the metropolitan area from which most participants came, and the way this community has become my adult home
- The fragile community of Jews and Christians and Muslims and Arabs and Palestinians we encountered throughout the trip, all of whom call the land we visited home
- The community we as Christians share with Jews, out of whose scripture and heritage we come
- And the community of the nation I love, whose flag we were saluting and whose anthem we were singing, in foreign but holy waters.

*So God created humankind in his image,
In the image of God he created [us],
Male and female he created [us].*

The “Us-ness” of creation.
The “Us-ness” of this Table.
Holy “Us-ness.”
Holy Table.