

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, WY
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Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme-(Trinity Sunday) A Rich Creation.
Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Matthew 28: 16-20, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

It is Trinity Sunday. Actually, every Sunday worship service involves God in some way as Creator, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is especially noted in the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed we usually confess and in the Gloria Patri and Doxology we sing. But this Sunday has the Trinity as a special focus. The one of the few verses in the Bible that particularly highlights the Trinity, God as three-in-one, is from II Corinthians 13: 13. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." What a rich description of God this is.

Listen for it with me as this verse is woven into the interpretation of the Word.

I love the first verse in the Hebrew Bible, "Barahsheith barah, eloheim eth hāshadeim waeth haeritz." Please repeat it after me as I say it again in Hebrew. In modern English it is, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth." What a rich opening line to a rich statement of faith about a rich creation. What makes all of this truly rich is not the unique antique value of the ancient Hebrew language, nor the commercial value of the heavens and the earth, but it is that God, called Elohim here in the Hebrew, created the heavens, hashadeim, and the earth, haeritz, and is recognized for it. Even the opening lines of today's hymns are rich creations because God is the center of them. "Holy Holy Holy, Lord God Almighty," "I Sing the Mighty Power of God," and "Lord You Give the Great Commission."

Creation is a gift of love from God to all living beings, and today's passage from Genesis is a hymn and/or litany of thanksgiving to God for this very reason. What adds to the richness of this passage is that its writing came not out of good times, but in the midst of some bad times.

Please consider with me what Biblical scholars have found concerning the creation story or hymn we have in Genesis 1. They believe that the final written form of this story was placed on scrolls by a small group of Israelite priests in the 6th century before Christ was born. We owe a great debt to these priests. Israel had lost a great war to the Babylonians and their King, Nebuchadnezzar. The priests and most of the people of Israel were taken away into exile in Babylon. II Kings 24 tells of this. They had lost their homes, belongings and community. In contrast, Babylon was a very wealthy and prospering city with hanging gardens and all the material delights available in those days. To lose a war in ancient days was interpreted by people to mean that the victor's god was stronger than the loser's god. So, it looked to many that the gods of the Babylonians were bigger, better and brighter than the God of Israel and creator of the world. It appears that the Babylonians harassed the Israelites about this, at least according to Psalm 137. The people of God were held there for 60 years. In all of this, many began to lose their faith in the one true living God.

This is only half of the story. Some people began worshipping Babylonian gods, which were all nature deities. It seems that the Babylonian creation story, called the "Enuma Elish" was a part of this. It reads like a Jerry Springer show at its worst. In this story there was a great war between the false goddesses Tiamat, and Marduk, the false chief god of Babylon. Tiamat is killed by Marduk and her body is supposedly used to create the heavens and earth. From another false god's blood humankind is created to do menial service for the gods. In fact, to these gods, humanity is only a commodity to be used up and spit out as spoils of war among the gods. This sounds horrible. This story teaches that the universe is chaos and there is no mention of love or a loving God. All of this false teaching was of the greatest concern to this small group of priests and those faithful to the one true loving God of Israel.

Our society, today, parallels this situation in many ways. Some people say that we are like the Babylon of Revelation. As parents and grandparents, do we not have great concern for our children as they go out from our homes to school, college, and work? We worry and pray about the kinds of gods, forces, powers and influences they face. Will they be used up and spit out by drugs, alcohol, nicotine, peers on a shooting rampage, cruel employers, pollution, war, abusive friends or spouses? Have we left enough of God's good creation for them to enjoy and in which to thrive? Even harder to face is the question, are our home situations controlled by the "gods" of chaos? Will our children know the love of God and will they know that we love them? Will they know how rich a creation we have?

It is also sad to see this rich creation passage used as a battle ground in today's educational world. Presbyterian scholar, Elizabeth Achtemeier wrote, "The unending attempts by creationists to make this science and impose it on our schools as such is invalid." (Achtemeier/Emphasis/May June/99 pg. 42). The Lutheran theologian, Martin E. Marty writes that "These chapters are not about how the world began, but how God's people came to be God's people." Emphasis/May-June/96 pg 34. In fact all of today's scriptures and all-of-the Bible are about how we came to be God's people and what this God, the-three-in-one to whom we belong is like. I will say it again, Genesis 1 is a hymn and/or litany of thanksgiving to God, not a weapon in an educational war.

Anyway, the small group of priests and believers in the sixth century BC, in the midst of bad times, had some wonderful answers, and some good news from God to share then, and today. God, known as Eloim to these priests, inspired them to see God and the rich creation God gave us in a whole other way.

The first thing we see in the Genesis account is the radical distinction between creation and Creator. Only God is "in the beginning." "Moreover, God is not the world and the world is not God. Instantly nature is dethroned and de-deified. "Sure, nature affects us, but it is neither the ultimate condition of life nor that to which we are finally responsible. The God of Genesis stands alone, transcendent, at the beginning. To this God alone, the whole creation stands subordinate."

"Not only is nature dethroned, so is Marduk and the idolatry of empire, the Babylonian empire in particular. No one, not even the mighty empire of the Babylonians stood outside the ultimate control of the God of Genesis." Today, this includes our own nation, the worlds so called "superpower."

In Genesis 1 we can also see how the false nature gods of Babylon are dismissed to the level of ordinary creation. We see "in the beginning " how God takes on the chaos of the universe and makes it into something that is decent and orderly. "On the first day," the wind or breath of God moved over the water. I have always imagined the sound of that action by God to be like the lowest notes on an organ. On this day and in this action "the so called God's of light and darkness are dethroned. The second day, it is the gods of sky and sea. On the third, it is the gods of dry land and vegetation. On the fourth, the sun, moon and stars. On the fifth and sixth days, members of the animal kingdom are put in their place. Last of all, humankind, the creature so prone to self-deification, is set firmly in the created order. One by one the idols of Babylonian culture are brought low and humankind is left to serve God alone." This is very good and rich news. Then the very good and rich news for humanity is that in contrast to the false Babylonian gods, Genesis tells us that the one true and living God of creation created human beings in God's image. "This means we are not gods nor are we slaves to the whims of nature or other 'gods.'" The good news is that males and females are created equally in God's image and this means that we are all eternally precious to God. We have been given dignity, God's love, and have the responsibility to share this dignity and love with the rest of creation and each other.

("Interpretation" by Rhorbaugh, Keryma Program, pgs. 20-25).

Our call to worship, Psalm 8, also spoke to this and may have been written around the same time. So, God worked through a small group of Israelite priests to preserve and share this very good news with a besieged and exiled people 2600 years ago. It has been passed onto you and me today, who also may feel besieged and exiled at times in this chaotic world. What a rich God we have. What a rich creation God has given us. God is a creator of what is good, of what is love, and of what gives dignity to all of creation.

The richness of God's creation and creating power, as we read in Matthew, did not end in Genesis, nor did the problems of false god's. Since creation, we human beings have managed to try to make ourselves gods, and in the process have fallen into slavery to the powers of sin and death. Almost 600 years after the exile another small group of Jewish men and women experienced again, God's amazing creative power. This is the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ." God in person came to dwell with us in the Son, Jesus Christ. Rather than punish humanity like a Babylonian god, Jesus Christ, God with us, absorbed all the destructive force of our human evil in his death on the cross. Then God took a creative action that was the most decisive event in human history, God raised Jesus from the dead.

Again in contrast to manipulative and abusive, false and distant gods of other cultures, we hear one of the followers of God in Jesus Christ, the disciple John tell us, "Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life." Now get this part, "For God sent his son into the world not to condemn (manipulate or abuse) the world, but so that through him the world might be saved." Amazing grace! Again the God who is three in one and creator of what is good, and of what is love, restores the original dignity to all of creation.

In the post resurrection scene in Matthew, we see this Risen Christ; the Son of God with his awestruck disciples. He says that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him by God, because he is God with us. With this authority he commands the disciples to go out into the world to teach the good news and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This means that the power behind any baptism we do is the God who is three-in-one. This means that we are again loved so much by God that Jesus wants us to go out and tell everyone in this chaotic world the good news that they are forgiven of their sins and loved by God. Baptism is an outward sign of this forgiveness, of the never-ending love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The teachings and grace of Jesus Christ are the way in which God wants us to treat each other with the same dignity, same love, and same grace that we were given at the original creation.

God in Jesus Christ promises never to abandon us, even at the end of this creation, but promises to always be with us in all of this work. Thus we have the communion or fellowship of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost Sunday, we heard how Jesus is always with us, through the power of the Holy Spirit and that in baptism we are sealed to God by the Holy Spirit. Any doubts that we have a responsibility to do Christ's mission work in all of the world must be erased by this command by our Risen Lord, who is the Son aspect of the God who is three-in-one.

Now the style in which we carry out the work of the one who is our Creator or Father, Son and Holy Spirit is so very important. Too often in history, the church has taken the authority given to it and used it like the Babylon mythical gods. At times we have treated our fellow human beings, which were made in the image of God and for whom Jesus also died as an economic or religious commodity to be used up and spit out as spoils of war. This is directly opposite of what our Triune God is like.

The style of our mission work for the Lord is to be like what Paul told the people of Corinth. Put things in order, agree with one another, live in peace, greet one another with a kiss—we do this part as the passing of the peace--and the world will see that the God of love and peace is with you. This is what God, the Holy Spirit guides and moves us to be because this is what the Triune God is like.

Another scripture that helps us to know when we are living in the communion or fellowship of the Holy Spirit is from Galatians 5: 22, 25. It says that the fruits of living in the Spirit are; "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." This brings us back to the rich creation God made "In the beginning," because it describes the richness of God.

The richness of God and God's creation never ends. I could go on about this forever, but even God rested on the seventh day. So now it is time to rest your ears and my mouth so that other parts of the worship service can help us grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

