

Very, Very Good
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Trinity Sunday, Year A
Genesis 1:1-2:4a

I don't think I've ever come across anyone who isn't, in some way, fascinated with the world around them. And by "world" I mean anything and everything that is around us that we see or hear or sense in some way. For some, the focus of interest may be the stars and planets and the mathematics of the heavens, how complex physics formulas help us learn about an ever-expanding universe. For others that fascination might be centered on the complete opposite end of things: it's the inner workings of the atom or the biological cell that really get them thinking.

Some might find those kinds of things boring or too mind-boggling to ponder but they do find themselves captivated by the love of a pet...or the view of the Shenandoah Valley from the Skyline Drive...or the twinkling of lightning bugs over the backyard in early June. And just look at the platypus! It has the body of an otter, the tail of a beaver, and the mouth of a duck and it lays eggs! And it stings! As someone once said, it's made up of leftover parts. Pretty fascinating.

We could go on and on and on with our lists of things about the natural world that astound and perplex us before we could even start with the things about human creativity and ingenuity that we find fascinating: The Pyramids of Giza. The Sistine Chapel. Shakespeare's plays. Ethiopian long-distance runners. Apollo 11. Those are just a few of the well-publicized, extreme examples, but there are ones we encounter every day, as well. The kindness of strangers. The healing of old wounds. The sharing of stories that somehow inspire and encourage us to conquer fears and overcome obstacles. Stepping back momentarily from the grind of the day-to-day provides the soul with wonder and the mind with plenty to contemplate.

Ancient peoples were no different. Life may have been a little simpler, a little slower, and a lot less digital way back when, but early civilizations bore the same types of wonder about the world around them, where they came from and what the point of life was. In fact, they had stories about it all, stories that made space for belief and faith about the meaning of existence. In the midst of all these competing—and, to be honest, downright depressing—stories arose two stories from one group of people who had a radically different understanding of why things were the way they were, so radically unique as if to make one believe the stories somehow came from a divine source altogether. For unlike all the other stories that all the other peoples were telling, theirs told of one God that created everything with order and meaning. Creation was no accident or by-product of cosmic warfare between rival deities.

In both versions the ancient Hebrews had—the one we hear today and the one that directly follows it—creation was a careful, thought-out process. There was purpose and sequence. Things built upon each other. The God who was responsible for it all was intimately involved from Word One all the way until things reached completion. And unlike the versions of creation that other peoples told, in the Hebrews' stories God actually gave of himself as the creation occurred. At each step along the way, this God declared with certitude what you and I never could deduce on our own, but which is so important: this

creation is good. It is not random or meaningless. It is not without value. Everything from the atoms to the Andromeda chain is the work of a loving and gracious Creator.

Humans, which were the crowning piece of this God's creative work, were not just declared good. They were pronounced *very good*. Male and female together, humans occupied a place in the order of creation that no other creature did. The Creator would not step back entirely once Creation was complete. In fact, creation would never really be complete all at the beginning, which is something the Hebrew people steadfastly maintained. It was and is an ongoing process, and God has made us in God's own image that we may steward it and maintain it ("be fruitful and multiply!") into the future.

Our challenge today, faced with so many more factual calculations about the age of the universe or how things technically got started is not to view these stories in the beginning of Scripture as pure scientific fact or hard historical evidence but rather in the way they were intended: stories that communicate something far more important than science and history. One can convey truth through things other than the scientific theory, and God didn't give God's people these stories in order to answer questions like "how" and "what" in the first place. That is, their primary concern is not to communicate how we all got here or what creation is made of. Rather, God has given us these stories to tell us the bigger truths like "why" and "who"—why things are the way they are and why we can sense so much beauty and wonder in it all. They tell us who we are as creatures, and that we are good and very good, and why humans do seem to occupy a special place in the midst of it. Male and female together, we are *"a little lower than God and crowned...with glory and honor"* (Psalm 8).

More than anything, however, we learn from Scripture who is behind and in the midst of all this. We discover that all along it has been the work of a very unique God, a God who never removes himself from creation and who loves it deeply. This God loves it so deeply, in fact, that this God becomes a part of it at one point as one of these image-bearing humans in order to put things back together the way God initially planned it.

For that's the other main issue with creation and our understanding of it. As good as we hear that it is and as fascinating as we find it—all the beautiful creepy crawling things and the birds of the air—we can also see and sense that it is not quite perfect. Deep down we know that it is broken and that we, especially, have made a mess of it...that we've made a terrible mess of each other. We have the slave trade and school shootings and skin cancer. We act in dreadful fashion towards our fellow creatures, become complacent towards the things that need to be changed, and when we make a mistake we utter "I'm only human!" forgetting that to be truly human actually means to be very good, crowned with glory and honor.

It is only through this love in Jesus of Nazareth that we begin to understand just how good and perfect we were designed to be. In the person of Jesus, the God who creates descends in order to save and restore us. Made of the very stuff of God and yet also sharing our skin, Jesus comes to take up a part in the very creation that has become such a mess, not withholding the divine power even from hanging on a cross. The love that is poured out between God the Father Creator and God the Son Jesus is then bestowed upon the rest of humankind so that we may actually share it with each other and help complete the work that God began so long ago.

This power, this life-giving love between Father and Son, is what we come to know as the Spirit, and it turns out we see the Spirit at the beginning, too, as God's breath of love swirl and sweep over the waters to bring everything into existence, however it scientifically may have happened.

Furthermore, we know that if God can hang on a cross to show the path of love and sacrifice in a way that redeems you and me from a world of violence and selfishness, then God will also be present for the length of time, and long after all of this we see has come and gone, and not even a brick of the Great Pyramids even remain, this God who is One and Three will remain, and we, somehow, with him. God opens himself with creation and then restores it again through his self-emptying power. These acts claim us, mysteriously, for a life with God that we can only grasp at in these days.

Standing back and beholding all of creation's grand story is certain to produce awe and endless fascination—the wonders of things like autumn foliage and the hummingbird migration patterns...the complexity of Bach Brandenburg Concertos and the Hubble Telescope...the potency of honeybee pollination efforts and Dizzy Gillespie's cheeks...the sacrifices of Normandy and Tiananmen Square...the power of war to maim and stunt as well as the power of forgiveness to heal and renew...the treasures of parental love and childlike trust...the beauty of human families created by conception and those born by adoption. Standing back and beholding it, the person of faith may feel inept at understanding or scientifically proving really much of anything about how it all fits together. To be sure, the person of Christian faith may continue to propose impressive and plausible theories for *how* it all comes about and *what* it all is made of. And that is well and good. But let us also not forget that the person of faith can also still praise and give thanks for the “why” and the “who” of this Holy Trinity, this churning relationship of Love-Within-Itself.

And we're not saying we totally understand God or have in any way figured it all out, but when we are so bold to say God's name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this is what we mean:

We have been created in the image of God.

That we have been redeemed by the Son of God.

And that we may take part in God's dreams of a world renewed, each in our own unique way, thanks to the ever-present Spirit of God.

And by the power of that same Holy Spirit we may echo the story the ancient Hebrews gave us: Lord Almighty, you are good. You are very, *very* good.

Thanks be to God!

—*The Reverend Phillip W. Martin, Jr.*