

“God Provides Light”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 12, 2021

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a

Last September, we began our walk through the Old Testament portion of the Narrative Lectionary by reading a different creation story: the one immediately that follows this story; where Adam and Eve are formed from the earth by the God who walks in the garden with them; where they are called to name the animals and till the earth; where they are tempted by the serpent to eat an apple from a forbidden tree. That story painted for us a picture of who God is: present and hands-on, creating boundaries and opportunities for humans to either follow or reject.

Today, we find a different portrait of God. One who speaks the world into being over the course of seven days: the first three creating the environment in which we live; the next three populating that environment with birds of the air and fish in the sea; all types of living things: from plants to animals. On the sixth day, humanity is created in God’s own image and given dominion over the entire earth. And then, on the seventh day, God rested, blessed the day, and made it holy.

The creation story we read this morning is neither history nor science as today’s scholars understand those disciplines. Instead, it is poetry and doxology. As children of a scientific age, we struggle to see truth in these art forms; not because the Bible is being untruthful to us, but because our modern imaginations are impoverished. We have such a hard time believing that a day could be anything but a 24-hour time block. But, to believe this story as true is not to reject science; it is to probe deeper and acknowledge who we are and whose we are. It is to affirm, by faith, the reality that a good God created a wonderful world and a beloved humanity.¹

Several things stand out to us as we read this first account of creation. First, we notice that the world is not created out of nothing. What already exists is described as an earth without shape or form; literally, a chaotic chaos. From these materials, God begins to speak what will be: first that there is light instead of only a dark void, then that there is land and sea and sky. The sun and stars and moon are set above us to define time: the days and months and seasons that mark and provide rhythms to our lives. Thus, plants and creatures are designed to grow and reproduce: life is marked by

¹ Debi Thomas, “The Best of All Beginnings”

both death and rebirth. As stewards of the earth, we are called to join with God as co-creators and sustainers of life.

As Walter Brueggemann describes it:

*God and his creation are bound together by the powerful, gracious movement of God towards that creation. This text announces the deepest mystery: God wills and will have a faithful relation with earth...the binding is irreversible. God has decided it...The mode of that binding is speech.*²

Next, we notice that God not only speaks, God also sees. Six times over the course of this creation story, God declares that what has been created is good. And then, after making human beings and giving them authority over creation, God sees what has been made and declares it to be supremely good. The creative process is complete when God has established our relationship with the earth and all its living things: that we are responsible to care for and to serve God's goodness.

What does this story teach us about what God is like? Unlike in the Adam and Eve story that follows, God does not walk in the midst of creation; God does not form us in the same way a potter molds clay. We are not told where God comes from; or what to eat or avoid. Instead, from the very beginning, God endows humanity with the time and space necessary to flourish: to grow and to renew; to take and to give back; to work and to rest.³

We know, of course, that humanity has not always – and is not today – doing a great job at flourishing. For a year and a half, the entire world has been battling against a deadly pandemic and – though we now have tools to help bring it under control – human decisions have caused us to experience yet another spike in rates of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. Voting access, reproductive rights, adequate food, and affordable housing are all in short supply. Over the past weeks, we have witnessed an unprecedented wave of wildfires and floods; created – as we now know with scientific certainty – by human-caused climate change. We are facing the challenge and opportunity to welcome and integrate tens of thousands of Afghani refugees into our country. And this weekend, we relived the horror of the 9-11 terrorist attacks which have indelibly altered the way we live in the world.

Yes, God created a good world that gives us the time and space we need to flourish. And yet, it is a world that does not insulate us from the chaotic chaos that seems to be all around us. For most of us, this word chaos has negative connotations.

² As quoted by Geoff McElroy

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

We are constantly seeking ways – both as individuals as well as communally – to avoid, manage, or contain chaos. We tend to think of it as a problem for which solutions: such as keeping it at bay, separating ourselves from it, and the imposition of order and structure; must be found.⁴

God did not eliminate chaos at creation. Yes, God created boundaries and divisions, but made humanity – who are created in the image and likeness of God – with the ability to respond, individually and collectively, to the chaos we confront. Sometimes, when we find ourselves in the midst of chaos – which we cannot always control – we need not fight against it, but instead seek to live in better relationship with it.

As I have been reminded over the course of my doctoral program studies, our relationship with chaos is no more evident than in the way we approach Sabbath. As we heard in today's text, God spoke into creation all that there is over the course of what the author says is six days. After seeing that everything was good – even supremely good – God chose to rest on the seventh day, blessing it and calling it holy: which means special, different, set apart.

In the giving of the Ten Commandments, God reminds us that we are also meant to make the Sabbath day holy: to set it apart as special and different than other days. We are to set aside work – the need to produce and provide – and instead allow ourselves rest and God to provide for us. And not only are we to rest, but we also allow members of our household and neighbors to cease working and find rest as well. As a holy day, we spend it deepening our relationship with God and with others in our community; trusting that we will not lack what we need or fall behind; having faith that God – the creator of all things – will indeed provide for us.

What most of us have learned, though, is that it is challenging for us to cease from our work – from producing and providing for ourselves – and place our trust in God. Many people in today's world – not only but including health care and other essential workers – do not always have the option of taking a full Sabbath day of rest. Often, even if we are not at work, we are planning for or thinking about work, worrying about what still needs to be done.

The creation story shows us a God that incorporates rest not only on the seventh day, but each and every day. In poetic form, we hear God working each day – speaking, sorting, and seeing the world come into being – and then resting at night after each day. God provides light and its creative energy, but also darkness and its

⁴ Karla Suomala from *WorkingPreacher.com*

restorative rest. Human beings – who are created in the image and likeness of God – are not meant to work, or be thinking about work, twenty-four hours a day. The rhythm of rest and renewal is built into our lives; and we can trust that, just as the sun will rise again with each new day, the time for work will come again soon enough.

And just as the rhythm of rest is built into each day and week, so it is with the various seasons of our lives. As I learned during my recent time of Sabbatical leave – sometimes with more resistance that you might imagine – God intends for us to periodically take leave from our responsibilities: to experience respite and trust that others in the community will continue to work while we are at rest. Sometimes, when we enact boundaries on our time and energy, it gives permission for other people to use their God-given talents and voices in new ways. Our ability to rest may not only renew and refresh us, but help to create a better world.

So, what might happen if we use our God-inspired energies and talents in new ways? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes the Sabbath as a “Temple of Time,” built when we trust in God to provide what we need. As we develop our own Sabbath rhythms – whether daily, weekly, or seasonally – we add bricks to this sacred structure. Allowing ourselves rest and renewal – which is provided to by God – we grow more adept at living in, rather than trying to fight off or escape from, the chaotic chaos that is an innate reality of our world.⁵

Friends, God has made us – and desires for us – to flourish. Often, that requires us to be at work, but it also calls us into spaces and times of Sabbath: choosing to sometimes cease and find rest; in God. Amen.

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*