

“Indeed, It Was Very Good”

Genesis 1:1-2:4a • Psalm 8 • 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 • Matthew 28:16-20

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June 4, 2023

Trinity Sunday

Today is the day in the church year that is called Trinity Sunday. On this day, every year, we remind ourselves that we worship one God in three “persons,” as they have traditionally been called. Sometimes on Trinity Sunday I try to explain that in some detail. I’m not going to do that today. Instead, I’d like to focus our attention on that beautiful passage from Genesis, the first of two creation stories that the Bible contains. This shows up in our sequence of biblical readings on only *one Sunday* out of the entire three-year cycle. It’s an important lesson, worth exploring from time to time.

This passage is read today because all three persons of the Trinity are present, either explicitly or implicitly. The first person of the Trinity, whom the Nicene Creed calls “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen,” is obvious; the word “God” appears no less than 35 times. The Holy Spirit shows up in the second verse. The NRSVue reads: “the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” The footnote at the bottom of the page tells us that the phrase “a wind from God” could also be translated “the spirit of God.” That’s because in Hebrew, the word for “wind” is the same as the word for “spirit”: *ru’ah*. Most English translations from the past five centuries say “the Spirit of God.” Both are legitimate translations. Those that choose to use the word “wind” convey the *activity* of the Holy Spirit: the Holy Spirit *blowing* over the face of creation. Either way, the implication is clear: the Holy Spirit is at work!

But what about Jesus? Where is he? Well, when John set out to write his Gospel, he began by recalling this creation story with his very carefully chosen words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” From a Christian perspective, Jesus is *very* present here in this opening story in the Bible, even if he is not mentioned by name. So *all three* persons of the Trinity are involved in God’s magnificent act of creation.

The narrative says that when God began to create the heavens and the earth, “the earth was complete chaos.” Literally, it says the earth was “formless and void;” in Hebrew, *tohu wa bohu*. “Darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God [or the Spirit of God] swept over the face of the waters.” Like a master potter working with clay, God starts with a lump, and then designs a masterpiece. “Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” Note that God does not create the darkness; the darkness is already there; God just gives darkness a name. The waters are already there too; God doesn’t create them; God just creates a division within them: “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” The dome is the sky. God gathers the waters under the sky into one place, and the dry land appears, which God calls “Earth,” and the waters, “Seas.” God says, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed and fruit trees of

every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” So burst forth the plants and the trees. God says, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” So, God creates the two “great lights” – the sun and the moon (although now we know that the moon is not a *source* of light, it just *reflects* light) – and all the stars. God says, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky,” thus giving birth to every living creature in the sea and the sky. God says, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind,” which results in the creation of every land animal. Finally, God says, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness.” According to the narrative, we are the crowning and final act of God’s creation. “So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Both men *and* women are made in the image of God. God is beyond gender. God has traditionally referred to as “he,” but please do not make the mistake of thinking that God is *male*! God blesses humanity, and gives us some instructions, which basically boil down to: (1) be fruitful and multiply; (2) have dominion over all the creatures that live in the water and in the sky and on land; and (3) humans and animals are allowed to eat the fruits and vegetables that God created. No creature is given permission to eat meat yet; that doesn’t happen until chapter 9, after the Flood.

All throughout this process, God has been looking at the things that have been created, and it has been consistently good. Now, God takes a step back, and looks at *everything* that now exists – “and indeed, it was very good.” Creation is *very good*. It’s a beautiful story, told majestically and poetically, placing us as the pinnacle of God’s creation. But how should we interpret this story today? I want to talk briefly about the *duration* and *sequence* of creation, and about our *mandate* for creation.

First: the narrative says God created everything within a period of six days. On day 1, God created light, and separated light from darkness. On day 2, God created the sky, and separated the waters. On day 3, God gathered together the earth and the seas, and vegetation sprung from the earth. On day 4, God created the sun and moon and stars. On day 5, God created the creatures in the sea and sky. On day 6, God created the land animals, and the humans. Then, finally, God “rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.” Does that mean God created everything within six twenty-four hour periods? Many people who read the Bible literally think so. Indeed, many people believe that God created the heavens and the earth in six days, approximately six to ten thousand years ago. They come up with that date by using the genealogies in the Bible and taking all the numbers at face value. This is called “Young Earth Creationism,” and it exists both in Christianity and Judaism. The traditional Hebrew calendar derives from a dating scheme based on the biblical account. In that calendar, this is the year 5783 *anno mundi*, that is, five thousand seven hundred eighty-three years since the creation of the world. According to a 2019 Gallup poll, about 40% of adults in this country subscribe to some form of Young Earth Creationism, believing that “God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.” If all the evidence you are willing to accept is what the Bible says, well, that’s the conclusion you would probably come to.

But the thing is, when people seriously examine all the things that God created, they tend to come to a different conclusion. Astronomers, biologists, chemists, geologists, physicists – they all study aspects of this universe that God created, and the widespread consensus is that the universe appears to be approximately 13.8 *billion* years old. There was an initial burst of energy, followed by a rapid expansion. Over time, subatomic particles slowly formed stars and galaxies. Our solar system and this earth began to take shape about four and a half billion years ago. Microorganisms emerged about half a billion years later; plants and animals about one billion years ago; mammals within the

past three million years, and humans a bit later on. There is an *immense* amount of data to support all these conclusions. You don't have to deny the existence of a creator God to accept all this. You can believe in God *and* accept the findings of modern science at the same time. The inspired believers who wrote down the creation narrative didn't have access to all the data we have now, and the *meaning* of the narrative still holds true, even if the specific details might differ. Generally speaking, this is the position of the Roman Catholic Church, and mainline Protestant churches like us, and the United Methodists, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Episcopal Church, other denominations that have similar educational requirements for their pastors, and at least one branch within Judaism.

There's another view, somewhat of a middle ground, called "Old Earth Creationism," which generally holds that the "days" of creation are metaphorical or allegorical, with each "day" representing an epoch of a thousand years, or more. There is scriptural support for this; Psalm 90:4 says, "For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past or like a watch in the night." This was the position of many great Christian thinkers, like Augustine, Gregory the Great, the venerable Bede, Cyprian, Irenaeus of Lyons, Justin Martyr, and more. In this view, you just expand the creation narrative by a *long* time. The problem is that the sequence appears to be incorrect. The biggest issue is that the creation narrative says the earth was formed before any of the stars, but the evidence indicates that many of the stars and galaxies predate our earth by a *long* time. This picture was taken last year by the new James Webb Space Telescope. You are looking at a portion of the Carina Nebula. The things that look like mountains are hot gas and dust. In the background are a whole bunch of young stars. These particular stars are about 12 million years old, so they are younger than our earth, but most of the stars in the universe are much, *much* older. God's creative activity has been ongoing, and not everything seems to have happened in the sequence described in this creation narrative.

Okay. Let's turn to another question. What does it mean that we "have dominion" over all the animals? The Hebrew word means to "rule over," like a king. A good king looks out for the welfare of all the subjects in their realm. He doesn't abuse them or exploit them or kill them. If our job is to rule over the animal kingdom, how good a job are we doing? Well, to give you some brief statistics, we know of approximately 5,850 different species of mammals that have existed on this planet. These are animals that God created. Of those, more than 80 have become extinct. This is one of them, the Japanese sea lion, an aquatic mammal. They were harvested for their organs, which were used to make medicine; their whiskers, which were used to make pipe cleaners; and their skin, which was used to make leather goods. They were overhunted. The last time one was seen was in 1974. They appear to be all gone, forever. Or, take birds. There are more than 11,000 known bird species. Of those, 159 are extinct, and another 226 are critically endangered. You've probably heard of the dodo bird, which died out in the 1700s. The passenger pigeon was declared extinct in 1914; it died out from over-hunting and a devastating blight which greatly reduced the number of chestnut trees in North America. The most recent loss was the Alagoas foliage-gleaner, a bird native to Brazil. It hasn't been seen since 2011, and was declared extinct in 2019. The primary cause was habitat destruction – deforestation. Another of God's magnificent creations, placed under *our care*, now gone forever. The general consensus among scientists is that if human impacts on the environment continue at their current rate, *one-third of all bird species will be gone by the end of this century*. Is that *really* the outcome we want from our reign?

God's creation is utterly astounding! From distant galaxies to the critters that inhabit our own neighborhoods, this universe is *rich* with God's magnificent creations. "Indeed, it was very good!" We are God's appointed *caretakers* of all the creatures on this earth. Let's do that job – and do it *well*.

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