

Trinity Sunday 2023
6.4.23

Genesis 1-2:4

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. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, '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.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, '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.' And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

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.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (944)

Authority is the power to name what's real.

We hear it otherwise, I know. *You* likely hear it otherwise, I know.

This is how you hear it: authority is anyone who has power over you. Authority is the one who stands for the law or represents, and even wields, the power of the state. Authority is anyone who's "in charge," anyone who has been put in charge by an authorizing structure. An authority is someone whose been authorized to exercise authority—

and very often we don't like these people. Or at least we're skeptical of these people. I mean, question authority, right? Timothy Leary advised that from the counterculture of the 1960s, but it's advice you hear these days not just from the fringe. It has become, itself, a voice of authority, to question authority.

But I want you to understand "authority" differently. I want you to consider authority as the power to name what's real. With the word "author" tucked right in there, authority (to my mind) is the power to *author*, to name what's real or to name what will become real, manifest. Those with authority demonstrate integrity between speech and act, between naming and the reality being named. There's a similarity there, a symbolical closeness. Those with true authority demonstrate such closeness as to be practically immediate, no space between what's said and what's done, what's proclaimed and what's lived.

God said, “Let there be light!” And there was light. The name: the thing named: one and the same: true authority.

The question came up in Bible study as to how we’re supposed to read this story, this creation story from the Bible, this one of two creation stories found in the Bible. How to read it; and the attending question, why to read it.

We know how *not* to read it. Don’t read it as science. Don’t read it as a real description of how the material forms of creation actually came into being.

Don’t even bother reading it metaphorically, as if each day named in the story stands for an epoch of time. I mean, the story *sort of* implies evolution, a creation that grows from the previous act of creation. But, no, because the order of things made doesn’t map onto the actual, material formation of things. See, there was light before there were the sources of light: light came to be on the first day, but the sun didn’t come to be until fourth day, which is after when vegetation was said to grow up, on the third day. But how could there be plants without the sun?

And it’s unlikely the original tellers of this story supposed otherwise. It’s unlikely that the people who first imagined and told this story thought plants preceded the sun in some actual way. So, instead the story is saying something about essence and existence. Sartre, Jean-Paul Sartre, in the 20th century said existence precedes essence, which is to say the meaning of you as an existing thing doesn’t come *before* your existence, but comes from it. This story is saying the opposite: your meaning is established before your existence comes into being—and this is your meaning: love. You are to love and to be loved, regardless of what sort of turns your existence takes.

Sartre, the late modern existentialist, claimed existence precedes essence. This story suggests essence precedes existence. Light comes before the sun—even if also light comes *from* the sun.

But I digress...

We know how *not* to read. It’s not science. It’s not even suggesting of science. How, then, to read it, and then also why? What light does this story shed, so to speak? What does it tell us given what all it *doesn’t* tell us?

Well, here’s one thing, but far from the *only* thing.

There are lots of creation stories. Out there, in the world, there are lots of creation stories, as many as there are peoples who’d have imagined their own origins. Two of them (these stories) ended up in our Bible. One is thought to have come from one region and their people, and the other thought to have come from another region and their people—which weaving together makes

up much of the earliest stories in Genesis. Two creation stories, two flood stories, though the creation stories are laid side by side, while the flood stories are woven together, each verse practically a repetition of a previous verse: it's thought two peoples came to be one, which came to be the earliest Hebrews now settled in Canaan.

So, there are lots of creation stories, two of which ended up in our Bible, having come from two peoples who resulted in one people who begat our people, making these stories our stories as well. And a great many of these creation stories, come from all the world over, come from across time and almost every people: a great many of them imagine a battle at the very beginning of things. The forces of chaos beaten back by the force of order and intelligibility by which is established a world that can be understood and lived amidst. The forces of evil beaten back by the force of goodness and sensibility. The leviathan, enormous, monstrous, come from the deep, tamed so order can reign. Many, many are the creation stories that seem to imagine violence as the generative event—violence manifest in some beast or monster, or violence simply as a force as a flood or storm.

Many stories imagine the beginning as the result of a great act of violence.

This one, though: not so. The world that this creation story would have us imagine is one whose origin isn't in violence. The world we're to inhabit because of this, one of our origin stories, comes to us simply of a spoken word.

No violence. Just authority: "Let there be light," and there was light. No battle, no great war; nothing killed off so to secure order: we come not from force but from authority, true, good authority.

Which is why we can still often sense when authority is true, and all the many times when it is not true: when the thing being said isn't actually the truth.

Remember that viral video from a few years ago: a woman is being detained. A security force of some sort has handcuffed her and is now holding her. And she begins to make up a song: "You about yo' job. You about to lose yo' job, cuz you are detainin' me for nuthin'."

Well, the security guard didn't lose his job. But he did have to let her go because he was detaining her for nothing. So, who was the truer authority in that case?

The song lived on, showed up at protests. People chanting: "You about to lose yo' job!" Protest as prophecy.

One of the best ideas I've come across in the last year or so is a further playing out of this understanding of authority as the power to name what's real. When authority is true, there's a

closeness between the thing named and the given name, between the thing symbolized in language and the symbol it's given. I tell you we're in a church sanctuary and you assess and agree: this thing which I've named "church sanctuary" does indeed seem to be a church sanctuary. I've spoken authoritatively, honestly, in good faith.

Conversely, there can be a distance, even a great distance, between the symbol and that which it's asserted to symbolize, between the sign and that to which the sign points. There can be a degrading from the truly symbolical into the deceptively diabolical. The diabolical is when the symbol is divided from the thing it purports to stand for. There's a deception there, a symbolical distance or even division. You look at a thing that's green and I tell you it's red: that's me being diabolical, the symbol I employ to indicate the reality before us not matching.

You look at injustice and I tell you it's justice: that's me being diabolical, the sign I use to indicate a reality at play being mismatched, in opposition. "That's not justice," you say. "That's injustice," you correct me in my abusive use of power and naming.

I say, "Peace, peace!" where there is no peace, and you, like the prophet Jeremiah, reject such quieting, such worldly deceiving. You want *justice*, the thing that matches the word for the thing.

The world is full of deceptions like this. The world—our politics—is brimming with the diabolical in this way, a deceptive use of words, a deceptive use of the power to name and declaim, an abuse of authority.

Think about it. Carry that idea around for a while. See how useful, how fitting it so often is.

Authority is the power to name what's real. True authority is when such honest naming can be trusted, proves true. True authority is when the one who claims authority demonstrates such power and the ones who are folded into the place of such exercised authority test it, confirm it, eventually confer it with their trust and their adherence.

Well, if this is a very conceptual sermon, then blame it on the fact that this is a very conceptual Sunday. Trinity Sunday is the only feast day of the church year that's not based on a story—like Christmas is with Jesus' birth, like Easter is with Jesus' resurrection, like all the feast days are. It's not even based in anything strictly scriptural, as there is nowhere any explication of God as Trinity. There's mention of God, of course. There's mention Jesus whom each writer of scripture understands as intimately related to God. There's mention of *ruah*, spirit, the Holy Spirit. But nowhere are these things put together in any storied way.

Except in the gospel reading that we just heard, Jesus, now resurrected though not yet ascended, telling the disciples to go to all nations and make further disciples by baptizing people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He simply says it, as if we'd simply understand it.

Do you—understand it?

I don't.

But I trust it. I trust it as true because Jesus is remembered to have said it, and I trust him; and because all authority has been given to him, which also seems true. He resembles the God to which he testifies. The stories told about him: he resembles the God to whom he seems so clearly to relate. There's a symbolical closeness there. And the things he's remembered to have said: they came to pass. And granted he's remembered to have said them after everything of him had come to pass. So maybe they were written back into the story. Or maybe they were remembered because they came to pass.

More than that, I trust it because good things come of it. Jesus said (remember?) that you can judge it by its fruits. And the fruits of the gospel are good: the urge to heal, the compulsion to restore, the move to closeness and kindness among people while also the zealous insistence that power be used to serve even the least of the world. If this is the fruit of trusting Jesus as the one on whom God has given all authority, then I'll trust that—because otherwise it's just super weird. That God would give all authority on heaven and earth to an illiterate peasant who never married or had children or traveled more than maybe twenty miles from his birthplace and then was crucified by the so-called authorities exercising dreadful power in the realms of what we now call religion and politics: that's a very weird assertion.

And yet it's a persistent one. And a more fruitful one than all the other assertions about ultimate authority that I've encountered and, in many cases, taken the time to probe.

So, here we are, on this very conceptual feast day. Happy Trinity Sunday, everyone. Go out into the world and see if it's true, see if you can trust it.

I'm willing to bet you can.

Thanks be to God.