

Creation Stories

2nd Sunday of Lent

March 16, 2014

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Texts: Genesis 12, John 3, Romans 4

It is a long ways from Genesis 2 to Genesis 12. Genesis 2 is where the readings for Lent began last Sunday – the Creation stories of Genesis 1,2, 3 tell the story of all of Creation, of human creation – the goodness of it all, and of the distrust and disobedience that enters into creation through Adam and Eve. It is a long ways from there to Genesis 12 in a lot of ways – a long ways in terms of events: Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, Babel and the dispersion of humanity; it is a long ways in terms of time – figuratively from the dawn of life and humanity; literally given in the many long generations after the days of Noah; a long ways until those generations finally lead to Abram – and we hear this: ‘Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go...’ – and Abram goes, and so the story goes from there. It is a long ways from the start of Genesis to there – but what I would like to say today is that actually in Genesis 12, we are back to the beginning – and so that in that sense it is not so far at all from Genesis 1 to Genesis 12, or perhaps even very close, because what we hear in Genesis 12 is another creation story. So let me tell you what I mean by that...

I think you could make the case for the call of Abram as a creation story in a couple of pretty straightforward ways: it is the beginning of a new focus in the Genesis story – a shift from the epic events and scope of creation, flood, dispersion, events sweeping in scope, to now the very particular focus on Abram, called by the LORD to leave his ancestral home and to follow God’s direction; and along with that it is the beginning of a new focus on a people: ‘I will make of you a great nation’ the LORD says. So it is a creation story in that sense of beginnings.

But I would like to go further with the idea of this as creation story, and say that what we hear happening in the very beginning in Genesis is happening now again in Genesis 12 as we hear the story of Abram. And what I mean by that is that the unique quality of divine creation is that it is creation out of nothing – it is bringing into existence something entirely new. So just to delve into that a bit more we need to do a bit of creation theology. The concept of creation out of nothing is expressed in theological circles with the Latin term *ex nihilo* – *creatio ex nihilo* is the theological conviction that God brings into being all that is from nothing. If you read Genesis 1 it says ‘in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’, which many theologians read as God calling all things into existence *ex nihilo*; but...right after that in Genesis 1 it says ‘the earth was formless and void...and the Spirit/wind of God moved over the waters...’ and creation takes shape. So other theologians say that this actually indicates God making order from chaos – not *creatio ex nihilo* but, and here I am at the limits of my Latin capacity, *ordo ab chao* – both of those threads are present there in Genesis 1. So, ‘creation out of nothing’ or ‘order from chaos’? (and parenthetically, these questions are very interesting in science too, and there is plenty of crosspollination here between theology and science). But OK - these are contrasting ideas, dueling Latin phrases, but what difference does any of that make? Well, there’s a lot at stake: is creation from God, or just formed by God? is creation a gift from God, or just a battle of God verses chaos? is creation initiated by God or just a reaction from God? What the reading of the biblical witness through Hebrew scripture and Christian story has affirmed is the importance of understanding and affirming the *ex nihilo* nature of creation – that the prior-ness of God to creation, with God initiating and offering the gift of creation is an essential witness revealed to us. And the difference that makes is it is a witness to a faith that sees God at the same time distinct from and involved in God’s creation; at the same time responding to but not determined by creation. And the difference that makes is that creation *ex nihilo* does not just happen in the beginning, but continues to be how God creates – which is what brings us to the creation story in Genesis 12.

Now if you look at the story of the call of Abram, I actually think you can make the case for 2 creation stories: one is an ‘out of chaos’ story – and here’s what that story sounds like this: ‘The LORD said ‘I will bless those who bless you and the ones who curse you I will curse’” I would call that a creation out of chaos story, because it is God dealing with things the way they are – this is a broken world – the realities of Genesis 2 and 3, of evil and flood and human division are very real; this is a chaotic world and it needs some order – and part of the way to do that is for God to say that life will be blessed when God’s way is followed and it will be a mess when it is not. I think that is what is being expressed there: ‘I will bless those who bless you and the ones who curse you I will curse’. But that is a limited effort, this creation word; it speaks to an ongoing cycle of blessing and curse, creation and chaos, that human history gives witness to - and chaos and curse often seems to be getting the upper hand.

But there is also another creation story present here in Genesis 12 – it is a story tucked on either side of the chaos story, and the creation story goes like this: ‘the LORD said: ‘I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and I will make your name great, **so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**’ Here is a creation story out of nothing – and what I mean by that is it is God creating something not from the materials available but bringing into existence out of who God is something new that is brought into this situation. You see, the way the world is, here is the way the story should go – something like this: ‘the LORD said I will bless you Abram and make you great and make you a great nation so that everyone will know how great I the LORD am and how great it is to follow me and how great you are for following me – I will bless you so that you and I will be blessed.’ Seriously – that’s how it works in a broken world, and that’s how the gods of such a world need to do things. But here, at a new dawn of human history, the LORD brings into existence something entirely unexpected – entirely new – entirely outside of human capacity to invent or create: ‘I will make you great and a great nation....so that you will be a blessing to OTHERS! – I will bless you, so that all people will be blessed.’ Entirely against the arc of what has thus far

unfolded, from out of nothing here is the creation, the story, the history, that God brings into being: which is that God calls, God blesses, in order for those called and blessed to be a blessing – and this new creation story encompasses all. Can we see the miracle of this creation story? – it’s just as stunning, I believe, as ‘God created the heavens and the earth’ in Genesis 1 – here in Genesis 12 out of nothing God creates the gift of call, blessing, grace, and places it irrevocably into human history.

It’s a long ways from Genesis to John 3 – long in time, in generations, long in the story of history and the stories of God. But they are not so far apart in this sense: in John 3 we are told another creation story. As Jesus talks to Nicodemus, do we hear the echoes of Genesis 1 as he speaks of Spirit/wind, Spirit/wind blowing where it will, birthing? – this is creation language! And it seems to me that what Jesus is telling Nicodemus is the story of creation out of nothing – the story of how God creates. As Jesus talks of being born of water and Spirit, of being born from above, Nicodemus can’t quite get – ‘how can this be?’ he asks. And Jesus, I think not to shame but with compassion or even playfulness says in verse 10 ‘you are a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?!’ and again in verse 11 ‘you do not receive our testimony?!’ Except something very interesting happens in v.11 – the you becomes y’all – suddenly Jesus is talking to a plural ‘you’ – suddenly Jesus is not talking just to Nicodemus, but to all of us: ‘is this so hard for y’all to understand, you religious folks? – can y’all not receive this testimony?’ It is hard for us to believe, that God’s Spirit can create from beyond our human control and invention – that God from nothing of our human doing brings into existence a blessing: ‘God sent the Son into the world not to condemn, but that the world might be saved through him’ – this is a creation story, Jesus says – God from nothing creating, gifting, blessing.

It is a long ways from Genesis 12 to Romans 4 – but not so far it turns out, because Paul is talking about Abram (now Abraham); and not so far, because as I’m sure you can guess, I’m going to tell you that this is a creation story. And just to make sure you don’t think I’m making

this stuff up, look at the last verse of the passage as Paul concludes: ‘...the God who calls into existence the things that do not exist’ – or as we creation theologians like to say: *creatio ex nihilo!* – it’s right there! And why is Paul concluding with this? – because Paul is passionately making the case to religious folks like us and to anyone else who will listen, that what the story of salvation is about is not us doing the best we can with what God gives us. No, the story of salvation is God continually calling into being the gifts of blessing, of grace, of life – God calling out with these creations a faith that is given to be a blessing to others. It is from out of nothing in creation – from nothing in us, not because we are worthless but because we are not God – that God brings into existence a way of blessing to hold us and to bless all.

It is a long ways from Creation to Abraham to Jesus to us, but not so far when we realize we are part of a creation story too. We follow the path in this season of the One who reveals to us that God brings into this world a blessing of life that no chaos, no brokenness, no death can overcome – the One who reveals to us, the One who is, the God of Creation. As we go from here, we carry that revelation, that in the chaos, brokenness, death, of our lives and world, there is even now a creation story at work in us and through us. ‘Do you not understand?’ Jesus asks – God calls this truth into existence: you are a creation story too – created by Christ to be a blessing.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.