

Getting Our Story Straight

Trinity Sunday

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Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Cor. 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

Perhaps you've had a nightmare that goes something like this:

Enter student, pumped up for exam he thinks he's going to ace. As he sits at desk, he rehearses last minute facts & fiddles with blue book & pens.

STUDENT: I am SO READY FOR THIS! Ask me anything about Shakespeare...

"Romeo, Romeo—wherefore art thou, Romeo?"

"To be, or not to be—that is the question...."

"Double, double, toil & trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble!"

He stands, reciting with great energy--

"And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day!"

Enter proctor, holding clipboard & exam.

PROCTOR: Please take a seat. You have exactly one hour to complete the exam.

She hands him exam. He sits, picks up pen, opens blue book & settles in to read the first question to himself....

STUDENT: OK—here we go!

“Is the phenomenon of quantum mechanics best explained by ordinary differential equations or partial differential equations?”

Wow—that must be from a play I forgot to read. Oh well, at least I’ve got a 50-50 chance of getting it right....

He shrugs and writes/guesses:

“Ordinary differential equations.” Next question—bring it on!

“Explain how the logarithmic derivative of a function for all positive real numbers is equal to the natural logarithm of that same function, by nature of the chain rule.”

What the....? This can’t be right!

*He raises his hand & clears his throat to get the proctor’s attention.
She comes over.*

STUDENT: Excuse me, but I think you’ve given me the wrong exam.

PROCTOR: I doubt that very much. What’s your name?

STUDENT: Jon Jerow...here for the Shakespeare exam.

PROCTOR: Yes, here you are. Jon Jerow—calculus exam.

STUDENT: But that's not fair! I prepared for Shakespeare! Ask me anything about Shakespeare!

PROCTOR: Always with the excuses. You'd better get busy. You've only got 55 minutes left.

Student makes gesture of despair; skit ends.

So—does anything about that scenario feel familiar—either as a recurring nightmare or—heaven forbid—an actual memory? You've prepared for one test but you're forced to take another—for which you are utterly UNprepared?

Sometimes I wonder if this is how God feels when we argue about Genesis 1. (And we are prone to argue about it—both inside and outside the church!) It's a story that's prepared to answer certain very important questions. But we don't ask those. Instead—whether we're fundamentalists, creationists, evolutionists, atheists, or vegetarians—we pepper it with questions for which it's unprepared:

- Were they really 24 hour days?
- What about the dinosaurs?
- Do you really expect us to believe the world is only a few thousand years old?

Don't get me wrong. These are perfectly reasonable questions and when we ask them we are utterly sincere. It's just that they are calculus questions for a Shakespeare exam. They put the Bible's story—our story—in an impossible position. They are like asking someone, "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" There's no way you can even respond without incriminating yourself.

Or there's the one about the kids in Belfast who corner a man from India in an alley and demand to know if he is Catholic or Protestant. "I'm a Hindu," he answers. "OK," they reply, "but are you a Catholic Hindu or a Protestant Hindu?"

All too often our own preconceived categories stop our ears to what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us through these ancient stories. And by the way—a myth is not a story that is false. A myth is a story that tries to get at deep truths in a creative way.

So what might the Holy Spirit be trying to tell us? What questions IS Genesis 1 prepared to answer?

It's risky to try and read God's mind—so I'd like to preface everything I'm about to say with a big PERHAPS. But I offer the following suggestions based on 20-plus years of teaching this story and trying to listen to it on its own terms.

And there are three questions that DO seem to “work.” Here they are:

1. What does Genesis 1 tell us about God?
2. What does Genesis 1 tell us about creation in general?
3. What does Genesis 1 tell us about who we are as human beings?

Here goes....

1. What does Genesis 1 tell us about God?

For one thing, it tells us that God created the “heavens and the earth” with deliberation and delight. I get the sense that God is having a really good time with this, don't you? Each category of creation gets its own “moment in the sun,” so to speak, and God gloats over each category and gives things their names and special instructions. There's nothing random or haphazard about this description of creation, and there's never any doubt about who is in charge.

If you were sitting around in 6th Century B.C. Babylon reading the first draft of Genesis 1, you might have been pretty surprised by some of those assertions. Oh, the order and the number of the things being created were pretty much the same as in the Babylonian creation story—but this Hebrew story has a whole different tone and a very different theology! There is ONE GOD in charge of it all, and a clear line of demarcation between Creator and creation. (Disappointing if you're a sun, moon, or tree worshiper!) And God simply speaks creation into being! That's ever so much more dignified than the Babylonian story, where the mother goddess gets mad because her children are making too much noise, so she makes war on her own family and then they kill her and the Tigris and the Euphrates flow from her eye sockets and well, you get the idea. No dignity. No delight. Just a big family feud.

But what does the story sound like from where we sit? Some of those same things are important. Creation is not random. Creation is not self-made. It's the beloved

by-product of a creative God who breathes it into being and celebrates each leaf and feather and fish.

So, those are a few of the things the story tells us about God....

2. What does Genesis 1 tell us about creation in general?

Well, I guess we've gotten a pretty good start on that one already. But I want to highlight something that's often overlooked: Creation is GOOD.

Now, how could we have missed that? Genesis 1 repeats it six times. What's up with that repetition and why does it matter?

It matters because in both the ancient and the modern world, we tend to disparage dirt. Everyone who has cleaned house can understand that. But what I mean is: *we exalt the spiritual at the expense of the material*. But we're not getting that from Genesis 1. We're getting that from Greek dualism. Over against all philosophies—ancient and modern—that would denigrate the stuff of creation, Genesis 1 insists: it's good. It's good, it's good, it's good, it's good—in fact—it's VERY good.

Now, OK—so it's not perfect. I've got bad knees and there are weeds in my garden. And if you want the Bible's explanation of that, you'll have to read ahead to Genesis 3. And if you want to know what God is doing to restore creation, you have to read all the way through Revelation. But the point is, even in our current “fallen” condition, creation has not become EVIL or even BAD. It's still good. Sin can and does find ways to sully it, but it is still essentially GOOD.

Why is this so important? Let me count the ways! Or at least let me count a couple of them. First, doesn't it make a difference in how we treat the rest of creation? Maybe we ought to think twice about blowing off mountain tops to get at the coal underneath. Maybe God misses the dozens of species going extinct every day.

But here's another reason creation's goodness is important. Did you ever stop to think about why *the resurrection of the body* is so “big” in Christianity? It's because Christianity is built on the OT's insistence that *creation is good*. God likes

bodies. God likes matter. God likes creation. And the plot of the Bible is all about restoring creation to its original state.

Which gets us into:

3. What does Genesis 1 tell us about who we are as human beings?

When we read what Genesis 1 has to say about human beings, it's easy to get what my father would have called a "big head." We're created *in God's image*, it says in v. 26.

In God's own image. Wow! And Psalm 8 describes us as being "a little lower than the angels." That's heady stuff. But we mustn't let it *go to our heads*.

A certain Old Testament scholar—who will remain nameless because I think if he were still alive he'd be embarrassed now to admit he said this—once wrote that creation is simply the "stage" on which humanity enjoys the starring role. I don't think that's what Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 are saying. Yes, we are a "little lower than the angels," and yes, we are "in God's image," but that doesn't mean we are not still a part of the rest of creation. It's so easy to forget this. Don't you ever catch yourself talking about "creation" as if you weren't a part of it? As if it were "over there" while you were "over here"?

The Bible itself has a sort of reality check for this brand of arrogance; it's called Genesis 2! There are two creation stories, after all, and Genesis 2 describes God creating Adam out of dirt. Now, dirt is good, right? We learned that! But it's still dirt. Even Adam's name is a pun on dirt. Adam/Adamah. Dirt Guy. And Eve comes from his rib, so she's Dirt Gal—or at best—Rib Gal!

So don't get a big head. And don't miss the fact that in both Genesis 1 & Genesis 2, we are created with responsibilities. We have work to do. We're not slaves, thank goodness, which is what the Babylonian creation story suggests. But we aren't created just to sit around and sip margaritas either.

Well, that was a very quick take on what happens when we ask Genesis 1 some questions it IS designed to answer. Questions about God, creation, and humanity's role in and responsibility for creation. I hope you've found it more exhilarating than exhausting—more provocative than pedantic. I also hope you've picked up on the idea that you don't have to take Genesis 1 *literally* to take it *seriously*.

But most of all, I hope the next time you get into a conversation about creation, you can find the courage to say, "I wonder what would happen if we asked the Bible the questions it was designed to answer?" Maybe if more of us did, we'd be able to hear Paul's appeal to "agree with other another & live in peace" (2 Cor. 13:11). And who knows? We might even have time to move on to the Great Commission to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19).

It's worth a try!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—Amen.