

We Make the Road by Walking: Alive in the Story of Creation

Genesis 1:1-2:3

We begin.

We begin today a year-long journey that you and I will walk on together, through the whole story of God's hopes and dreams for creation, as we see it through the lens of the Christian tradition. We join a movement of progressive Christians all over the world who are seeking to re-make what it means to be the Church by starting again; going back to the beginning, trying to recapture what Christianity looked like before it was a rich and powerful religion, before it had buildings and budgets and institution-sustaining agendas.

Because it really was a remarkable, convention-shattering thing. Christianity, the path of following Jesus, began as a revolutionary, nonviolent movement that shifted the way people looked at themselves and each other and the way things had always worked before. It promoted a new and different kind of aliveness—not only for those who could afford to think other-worldly thoughts, but for people who scraped their lives together and lived on the margins of society. Its stories honored women and children in a world that had always been ruled by married, moneyed men. It challenged slave masters to free their slaves and see them as peers. It defied all those religious taboos that divided people into us and them, in and out, good and evil, clean and unclean.

The path we walk in opened people's eyes to see what they had never been able to see clearly before, and it invited them into a new kind of aliveness. It empowered them to make change—in their own lives and in the world around them. The stories they told inspired them to teach one another what they were learning, and to stay with the practices of transformation until they themselves were transformed.

This is what I want, what I hope, for us in worship this year. That no matter how old you feel or how many years you have been swimming in this Christian water, you will hear its stories as new, as though they were intended to stretch and disrupt our patterns in the same way they have the power to do for people who are hearing them for the first time.

And so we begin with the first story, the story we read this morning, of God's creation of the earth. It comes from the book of Genesis, which *means* "Beginnings." We do not read this story as a scientific text; its purpose was not explain evolution or to confront the big bang theory. This story was first told for the same purpose we need to tell it still: to illustrate a deep truth that is present, no matter how long the evolutionary process took or how scientific knowledge progresses about how molecules and matter and human bodies got put together.

And the truth is this: that what we see in the universe is God's very self. What we find in it tells us something about who God is. Everything we see in creation—trees, rocks, stars, fish, humans in the affluent U.S. and humans in far-off countries where different languages are spoken and different religions are practiced—all of this is the reflection of who and what God is: holy, valuable, meaningful. Diverse—the full spectrum of color; the entire range of dark and light; the whole, wild sweep of what we think of as good and bad. All of it—all of it—is part of a whole, part of an amazing piece of artistry designed and constructed by a master whose love for the subject we can just barely begin to understand.

An artist in whose image we have been created. An artist who imagined and then made us—*us!*—and said, “Oh! That’s very good!”

Humanity has labored so long under the false impression of God as a stern, disapproving taskmaster who is always standing by ready to catch us in our mistakes, to whom we are never good enough. That image is not what I see in the story of creation, or indeed, in any of the stories of the Bible. The storyline that begins with humans being born into some original sin that we have to find our way out of before we can even be seen by God is just wrong. We—each of us—was born loved and cherished, declared “good” from the very start. That is our family of origin; this is our original truth. This is why, when Jesus went to be baptized, before he began acting like the Messiah at all, the heavens opened and God’s voice spoke loud and clear, “You are my beloved child. You make me very happy.” (Mark 1:11) Those are the words God speaks to you, to each one of us. It is only a lifetime of wandering away from this nearness to God, our forgetting who we are in relationship to our Creator—loved, cherished, needed, enjoyed--that can separate us from this truth.

How did this happen, this distortion that has led people to live in fear of a harsh God? How did a tradition that was meant to bring wide-open love come to signify judgment and shame? If it’s true that God has loved us all along, unconditionally and without ever giving up on us, why would God not have spoken up long ago, corrected the record?

Maybe it’s because one of the chief features of our God is humility, a willingness to live among us both hidden and revealed. This is the God who chose the body of a poor Middle Eastern carpenter who was executed as a criminal. A God who is perhaps being revealed again, right now, in Central American children who are fleeing violence and death, seeking only hospitality, our willingness to see beyond national and cultural borders. A God who lives in the church’s kitchen as well as in its sanctuary; and not only in the moments you are praying but when you are driving and working and cleaning out the garage.

These are the places where God is revealed. Perhaps this is the most important lesson of this Genesis text: that there is no division between the spiritual world and the material. God did not create the earth and dirt and water and humans and then withdraw back into some realm we must be elevated into. *This* is the world God lives in, the world God *chooses* to live in. If we find God—if we *seek* God—it will be in the ordinary, daily, concrete moments of our lives.

I want to come back for a moment to the commencement speech by David Foster Wallace that I mentioned earlier in the service. Wallace considered himself an atheist, but this is what he said in his speech at Kenyon College:

...Here's something...that's weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship--be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles--is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. ...

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings.

They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.

And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it.

But ... there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talk about much in the great outside world of wanting and achieving.... The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day.

That is real freedom. ... The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.

The Genesis story of creation, the first step in the path we walk on, is an antidote to the kind of soul-numbing conformity that Wallace was talking about. It's about being alive. Conscious. Not living on some default setting, but purposefully, with some sense that we are called to be something more because we were *created* to be more.

We are living inside the work of art that God has created. And we are not just extras, bit-part players, in this creation; we are human beings. We are the ones to whom God has said, "I am creating you in my image. Now *you* be the ones who bring aliveness and creativity and love—especially love—to the earth. I trust you."

And God saw that it was very good.

*Inspiration and guidance for this sermon and all sermons in this series come from *We Make the Road by Walking*, Brian McLaren (2014).