

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
May 18, 2008
Genesis 1 and John 1:1-5, 14
Trinity Sunday

Creative Chaos

It was on Tuesday evening when I most recently decided I had lost my preaching mind. A few weeks ago, it seemed like such a grand idea. “I shall preach on Genesis 1,” I decided. I had not wrestled and played with this poetry from Genesis in a long time. And I thought it would be fun to preach it on Trinity Sunday. In mid-April, preaching God’s creative activity of Genesis 1 seemed like such a grand idea.

And then:

May 2- A cyclone comes ashore in Myanmar, killing at least 120,000, leaving 2.5 million people in need of food, water, shelter and medical assistance

May 12- My brother-in-law who lives in Shanghai sends out a message about an earthquake. Chinese officials warn that by the time all rescue and recovery efforts are completed, this Sichuan earthquake might claim up to 50,000 lives.

May 13 – Terrifying tornadoes tear across our own Midwest and Southeast with winds blowing up to 175 miles an hour, ripping homes off of their foundations, twisting the metal of cars, cutting off roads and bringing down telephone lines.

Yes, it was Tuesday night, when I last decided that I had lost my preaching mind.

“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...”

Of course, Tuesday was also the day when 350 people came into this sanctuary to celebrate the life of Patty Schmidt and to give witness to the resurrection that is hers through Jesus Christ our Lord. As we remembered that day, Patty was vibrant, active and seemingly healthy just a mere 7 months ago. And then, the serpent of pancreatic cancer made itself known in her body. And Tuesday, we commended her back to God, the one from whom she came.

And later that evening, I sat on my couch and became convinced that I had lost my preaching mind. Why on earth would I want to preach the poetry of God’s good creative activity in the face of such ugly destructive chaos? Why on earth would we want to hear again and again “Let it be, and it was so, and God saw that it was good,” when everything around us seems to shout otherwise.

Let it be...and it was so...and God saw that it was good.

Cyclones, Earthquakes, Tornadoes, Cancer, Chaos

When we look at these seemingly incongruent portraits of creation and creatureliness, other than assuming we have lost our preaching minds, what are we to do?

We could take the approach that tends to get broadcast as **the** approach of faith. “It is all God’s will,” we can say. God created the world good and we have royally messed it up and this is what we get in return. God, our cosmic scorekeeper, is up there with a big red pen taking notes and taking names. When you get too many checks in the unfaithful column, God lets all hell break loose and we deserve it. Global warming, rising sea levels, increasing war—it is all God’s punishment for our unfaithfulness.

But lest I paint this response too broadly with the bawdy shades of caricature, we do have this portrait of God in some of our Scripture. Throughout the books of Deuteronomy and Judges, as well as in the prophets, we do indeed see the people Israel interpreting their history of either being the winners or the losers as God's first-hand orchestrated plan. When Israel is faithful and does not worship other gods, then God the Creator delivers them and leads them into victory. But when Israel is unfaithful, and forgets who and whose they are, then God lets the Babylonians have at them, or the Assyrians, or any of the other enemies that surrounded their tender tradition.

But it is not just the ancient Israelites who assumed God works this way. I clearly remember that when my own father was diagnosed with cancer, I immediately took God to court and demanded to know why it had happened to him—he was faithful, he was good, he did not deserve the chaos of cancer (as if anyone ever does). And I know that some of you have wrestled with similar questions regarding God and suffering and have reached similar conclusions. It must be God's will, we say. It must be. Some of us cannot make sense of it any other way.

After all, God is all powerful, right? The sovereignty of God is a bedrock understanding of our Reformed tradition. God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient: all powerful, present in every place, and all knowing. You see this picture of our Powerful Creative God in our text from Genesis. God is so powerful that God creates by speaking. God speaks a word, and it is so. That, my friends, is power.

And so, when we look at the seemingly incongruent pictures of the world as drawn by Genesis 1, and the world as drawn by the front page of the Dallas Morning News, we can certainly conclude that everything that seems to contradict creation's goodness must be God's judgment on our unfaithfulness. We can make that conclusion. We can back it up with some Scripture. We even might back it up with our own experience.

But, what if this creation story reveals for us something else? What if this creation story, held up alongside our Gospel passage from John, has a different sermon to preach for us this day? Listen: "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..." Did you hear it? Did you hear when and where God's creative activity first started to take shape? Right smack dab in the middle of the chaos.

In the beginning, God took the formless void, the watery abyss, the stuff of chaos, and created the heavens and the earth. In the middle of chaos, in the middle of the void, in the middle of that deep darkness and abyss, God began to create and make something new. Notice, God did not first destroy the chaos, blowing it to smithereens. No, instead, precisely in the middle of the chaos, God started to create, calling it all good, good, good, good, good, good, very good. It is kind of a strange use of power, if you ask me. Instead of destroying chaos, blowing it to smithereens, God works with and creates something new out of the chaos.

Now, keep listening. "Then God said **Let** there be light." And God said "**Let** there be a dome in the midst of the waters." And God said "**Let** the waters be gathered together and let dry land appear." And God said "**Let** the earth put forth vegetation." I could keep going, but I imagine you hear the repetition. Let, Let, Let. Each time God creates, God uses this strangely invitational language. I mean, it is odd, isn't it?

God could have just simply worked independently and unilaterally, alone and with absolute control. That is how the powerful do it, right? But that is not how God seems to work with creation. The way the text reads, you get this picture of a Creator who chooses both to initiate the creative process, but also to invite into the creative process. You get this picture of a Creator who chooses to invite that which is created into the ongoing work of creationⁱ.

“Let the earth put forth vegetation. Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures.” Our all-powerful, sovereign God could have done it very differently. God could have worked on and over creation. But according to Scripture, God chose to work with and in.

From just these two closer treatments of our text, we start to get a picture of a Creator God who uses power very differently than we might first assume, don't we? From just these two closer readings of the poetry of our creation story, we see a God who chooses to use power to invite rather than to coerce. A God who chooses to work within the chaos, within the created world, rather than on and withoutⁱⁱ. It is such an odd display of power and control, don't you think? Genesis 1 offers us a picture of God as a Creator who purposefully chooses not to act alone, but only in relationship—even in relationship with us. The text gives us this strange glimpse of a God who chooses divine vulnerability by involving those who are finite, those who are creature, into the whole process.

But honestly, if we are surprised by this, and I would suspect we are, I am not sure why. For “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God...and the Word became flesh and lived among us...” As people who follow Christ, we know it intuitively, don't we, that God's definition and use of power has always differed drastically from our own? A mentor of mine puts it this way “In Jesus, God looks like a struggling underachiever. Jesus' contemporaries were hoping for a more triumphant messiah,...They were waiting for a messiah who would show off God's stuff. Yet Jesus turns out to be a crucified disappointment. The first century, like the 21st century, expected deity to triumph through power.ⁱⁱⁱ” Indeed, in the 21st century, perhaps like the 1st century, we expect our God to destroy the chaos, not work within it.

But, looking at both Genesis 1 and John 1, we begin to see that our God does not work that way. In Genesis 1, we see a God who freely loves so much that God is willing to limit God's own power over creation in order to invite active participation from that which has been created. And in John 1, we first start to hear the proclamation that the Word becoming flesh, fully revealed in a manger and on a cross, is the central revelation of who God is and how God chooses to be our God. In both Genesis 1 and John 1, we see a God who freely loves so much that God is willing to be vulnerable and risk suffering.

Perhaps the sermon that Genesis 1 and John 1 preach to us this day is that indeed our God is all-powerful. One who can bring about creation with a word and it is so. One who can heal and transform and raise from the dead. One who is both the Alpha and the Omega. But Genesis 1 and John 1 also preach to us that our God is a God who chose from before the beginning to become weak in power in order to show us the strength of love. A God who, in both the poetry of the creation story and most fully in Jesus Christ, subverted the image of an all-powerful God—a God above and beyond creation and human suffering—revealing instead a God who invites, and works with, and even suffers and dies in order to show us, fallible creatures that we are, the overwhelming love God has for us and for all of creation. Hoping that one day we might lean into it and trust, even on the days when it seems like we have lost our preaching minds and cannot make sense of anything anymore.

And sisters and brothers, I know that even the sermons that Genesis 1 and John 1 preach to us this day do not clean up the mess of suffering. Genesis 1 and John 1 do not take the cyclones and the earthquakes and the tornadoes and the cancer and make it all okay. And I certainly cannot do that either.

But, I do believe that God is as good as Jesus said, and that the creation God made and is still making is good too. And I do believe that God will never tire of suffering with and through us until that day when there is no more suffering and all is well. When all tears are dried away, including the tears of our all-powerful Creative Triune God.

But until that day comes and we finally see clearly, Genesis 1 and John 1 remind us that in the middle of the chaos, God is still at work. In the middle of the suffering, God is still at work. In the middle of our world's craziness, God is still at work. And perhaps for those of us who walk through life holding Scripture in one hand and the newspaper in the other, on this day, perhaps that proclamation shall be enough. Knowing that God is still actively at work creating and recreating shall be enough...at least for now.

ⁱ Fretheim, Terrence E. "Creation in Community – Faith and the Environment," published in Creation on the Cross, on www.@thispoint.net. Edited by Mark Douglas and Kathy Dawson of Columbia Theological Seminary.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks Dad! Found in All Are Chosen by the Rev. Dr. Jimmie D. Johnson of First Presbyterian Church in Waco, Texas. He is the one who first introduced me to the theological concept of divine vulnerability and opened up the theological work of William Placher and Narratives of a Vulnerable God for me. Happy Birthday Dad!