

Where Did We Come From? Genesis 1-2:4

Introduction: Where Are You From

"Where Are You From?"

"Where are you from?" It is a question we ask each other early on when we are just meeting someone new. "Where are you from?" It is a wonderful question to ask, especially if you are like me from the South, where we have a way of looking to the past to discover who we are.

Illustration: Wait from Shelby

Asking the question may spark another connection we share with the person we met. I remember asking it of a waiter I once had in Chicago, whose accent had hints of a Southern origin. He said, "Oh, you would not know the little town I am from." I said, "Try me." He said, I am from a little town in the Mississippi Delta called Shelby, Mississippi." I said, "Really, you are from Shelby?" He said, "You are not about to tell me you know where Shelby is!" I said, "Know where it is? I lived there for three years and served as the pastor of the United Methodist church there!" Next thing you know, we opened up a whole world of things to share with each other. People we knew. Places we shopped. What we've heard had happened there since we both left.

The More Profound Question

Now there is a more profound and important question to ask: "Where are we from?" How did we get here? Why are we here? What's our story of origin as a human race, a creation? Is there a shared story that we can find together that will orientate our lives and help us to see what we have in common?

The Questions We Find Answers for in the Story

To answer those questions, we Christians and also Jews have always turned to the story of Creation from Genesis 1 and the story of Adam and Eve eating forbidden fruit from Genesis 2. We orientate ourselves and find out why we are the way we are by finding ourselves in these larger stories.

How is there such beauty, wonder, and order in this world? Where did it all come from? There is a God who spoke creation into being out of chaos and called it good. **Why is it we have this longing within ourselves to hear the voice of God and to know God?** Well, because there was a time when we walked together with God in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. **Why do we keep doing things that are not good for us?** Well, because we still have a seed of that "forbidden fruit caught in our teeth somewhere, a fruit so delicious and ruin all at once that we cannot get the taste out of our mouths" as Barbara Brown Taylor says it.ⁱ

Potawatomi Creation Story - Anish-i-na-ba

We do not have the only creation story. There are creation stories from all parts of the world and in most religious traditions. The Potawatomi Nations of the Great Lake region of North American tell a version of the creation story of the Anishinaabe (Anish-i-na-ba). The Great Creator (who had created everything) told Anishinaabe to go

throughout the world and to name everything. During his wanderings, he realized that he was the only species that did not have a mate, and he was lonely. His travels took him to the Great Lakes, where he heard a song coming across the lake. A woman was singing about making a home for him. He fell in love with the song and the woman. He learned how to cross the river and married the woman, The Fire-keeper's Daughter. They had four sons who went out in the four directions on the earth and populate the world.

One Native America Story Teller: ..."But It Is True."

One native American story-teller told his creation story and when he had finished he said, "Now I do not know whether this really happened...but it is true." I like that. Our story of creation is not meant to tell us the scientific how of creation but the who and the why. We waste so much energy in our faith when we feel a need to defend our creation story from scientific understandings of our origin. *Our creation stories offer us a comprehensive way to understand our relationship to God, each other, and ourselves. They offer us something that science cannot offer.*

Secular Humanist

Today as more people are inclined to reject religion, many are finding a need for something that will replace religious belief and practice.

- They would like a way that is consistent with science and does not require a belief in God.
- They value the lessons we are learning from science.
- They understand the importance of knowing that we live in a universe which is inseparably connected, a sort of dynamic luminous web, in which all the creation moves in an ongoing dance with everything else.
- They value the idea that we can no longer act as we please and not have what we do reverberate throughout creation in harmful ways.

The Limits

As helpful as this new freedom is proving for many, there are limits to what a scientific view can offer. As one thoughtful advocate of a secular approach to life confessed on a TED talk, people are only beginning to attempt to construct a system of thought that can replace all that religion provides for us. *He acknowledges that religious faith offers a comprehensive story with rituals and practices and a community joined in a moral purpose that is not easily replicated by those wanting a secular religion.*

Scripture: The Creation

The Creation: 500 BC

This morning we have read poetry together in our Old Testament reading about the creation of the world by God our Creator. The writer, probably a priest or a group of priests around 500 B.C., tells us that God is a master worker, an artist.

- God separates the waters on the earth from the waters in the dome of the earth.
- God separates the waters of the seas from the dry land of the earth.
- God creates all sort of vegetation, trees, fruit and seeds.

- God creates the light of the sun for the day and the light of the moon for the night and the seasons of the year.
- God then creates swarms of living things from the water in the oceans and the flying birds of the air who populate the dome of the earth.
- 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.'
- Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; male and female, God created them.'

Out of Chaos and Very Good

According to this story of creation, God created order out of chaos. God speaks into the preexistent chaos and the formless void, like an artist working with a messy lump of clay. God shapes and forms and breathes life into it, and something beautiful and magnificent is created. Each day God finishes the work and takes a look at what has been created and declares, "It is good." God does this until the seventh day and we are told that God says "this is very good, very good indeed!" And then God takes a well deserved rest and appreciates what has been achieved.

The Likely Historical Setting of the Writer

We've grown so accustomed to hearing the beauty of this poetry that we may not fully understand its purpose and power for those who lived some 2500 years ago. It was likely written in a time when the Jewish people were being held in captivity by the Babylonians who had enslaved them. They were living in a chaotic time. There was enough disorder and loss of control that the people of God were grasping for something they could believe in and hold on to. Politically and socially, everything was up in the air for them. *Maybe there is no Lord; only the gods of Babylonia are the real gods?*

The Great Affirmations of Creation

In that circumstance, a priest, some group of priests, had a clear revelation of truth from God. It was a breathtaking affirmation, one almost too wonderful to be believed. The creation is fundamentally good in its essence. The creation is good because the one who created everything was good. Not only is the creator good, the creator is powerful enough bring order out of chaos, to shape and form life from lifelessness. This creation has purpose and its purpose is love and relationship. We are placed on this earth to take care of one another as God cared for Adam and Eve, and as Adam and Eve cared for the creation.

Implication for Us

This has profound implication for how we understand ourselves and how we choose to live. If we believe this story, life at its core is good and everything has great value. Physical reality is good, our bodies are good, our desires and pleasures are good, life is good. Our problem is NOT that we are "bad to the bone." There is no doctrine of original sin in the Bible. Yes, we have a problem with sin, but it is not that we are fundamentally flawed. It has to do that we have forgotten our original blessing. We have forgotten that we have come from love, and for love we were created. We forget that

we are in the hands of a loving God who brings order and life out of chaos and we are God's partners in this world to the same.

An Outrageous Affirmation

I doubt we understand what an outrageous affirmation this is. Other people did not believe this. No one believed creation is good. Life is mean and short, full of injustice, suffering and death. No one believed that human beings were responsible agents, God's partners in the management of creation. Everybody knew human beings were insignificant, unimportant, living and dying at the whim of the gods."ⁱⁱ

Application: See the Good beyond the Bad

Difficult to Believe when...

I believe if we are honest, we still find it difficult to dare to believe the truth of such a hopeful affirmation. We have a way of seeing the bad in ourselves and the bad, especially, in others. The good is hard to see and affirm so much of the time. It takes a real leap of faith to believe otherwise. We are more acquainted with the chaos in ourselves, others, and the world. We see the fragility of life. We know something about a hurricane in paradise; that a virus can get loose; that bees in the world are dying; that extinction is accelerating at a break-neck speed; that a meteorite can be hurling towards the earth; that mushroom clouds could one day be seen around the world.

Personal Level / What Can We Do - Meditate

On a personal level we know what can go wrong. Just hearing the word "cancer" is a reminder of how fragile we are. We experience the goodness of life and love the order that we have, but we know out on the edges lives chaos.

What can we do? We can meditate. In our faith, we can take a stroll in the garden with God and be reminded of the paradise that has been given to us and the goodness of our lives and the One who has created life for us.

The Creation Story

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was without form and void, and the darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the earth. And God said, Let there be light...Let there be land...Let there be plants...Let there be animals. Let us make humankind in our own image, male and female, and give them responsibility, and God said, "It is good. It is very good!"

"Love Dispels All Fear"

"Love dispels all fear," the little book of 1st John says at the other end of our Bible. I've got those words etched into my wedding rings. I keep them with me all the time. It's a sort of mantra, a repetitive phrase or song that reminds me of what I believe. I don't want to forget. There is so much in this world that can take me away from what I dare to believe is true.

The Mantra: "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands"

Then sometimes, when I feel like a little boy walking in the dark where the shadows are growing large, I start to sing.

"He's got the whole world in his hands, He's got the whole world in his hands, He's got the whole world in his hands, he's got the whole world in his hands."

"He's got you and me sister in his hands, He's got you and me sister in his hands. He's got you and me sister in his hand. He's got the whole world in his hands." Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "This Way Home," November 4, 2012, National Cathedral Archives.

ⁱⁱ John Buchanan, "Can I Trust God and Science," September 19, 1999, Fourth Presbyterian Church Archives.