

The Poetry of Creation
St Mark's Episcopal Church, Radnor, PA
September 21, 2014
Genesis 1

I have titled my reflection with you today The Poetry of Creation. Imagining the creation story in Genesis as a profound poetic work is superior, I think, to imagining it as a work of technology or physics, as many have tried to do, with limited success. The regular cadences of the creation account, the repeated refrains, the rich and intricate images lead us to reminiscences of poetry, the ways that poetry speaks to our soul and to our emotions, the way that poetry orients us in a deeper world than mere description of event. Still more, imagining the creation story as poetry helps me to imagine God as a sublime poet, a grand creative imagination concerned not just with the physical existence of objects and forces, but with the subtle interactions within the world, with meaning and unspoken depth, with embodied relationships, with a world of color and shifting currents. God as creative poet is an invitation to enter the world so carefully, even lovingly evoked, to find ourselves in an uncanny relationship not just with the world God created but with the God who created it, one grand poetic tapestry; one grand poetic creator.

Given the beauty and symmetry of the ensuing depiction, it may be hard to remember that creation emerges from the depths of a chaotic state. Oh, it is true enough that the first words of the Bible, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" introduce God as a character in God's most defining activity, creating. In the beginning there is nothing at all, just the beginning, and then God flashes across that emptiness and heaven and earth are there, with no independence or lively description, only a relationship to God their creator. But then we receive specifics about the earth. It is formless and void, to follow the rather colorless words of most translations. I promise that I will not try your patience this morning with a lot of Hebrew but in this case, Hebrew can't be avoided. The words translated so flatly as formless and void are pronounced *tohu vavohu* in the original Hebrew. *Tohu vavohu*. Generations of scholars have struggled to provide a clear image of what these two words refer to. It is not a promising task, trying to picture clearly something that has no form and is 'void.' Try it for yourself. Once you pronounce the words you see pretty quickly that they were not chosen to provide a clear image of anything at all. They can't be visualized in any way, clear or unclear, but their sound can reverberate deep within us. I sometimes think the best way to read this part of the passage is with our best Boris Karloff impersonation. The earth was *tohu vavohu*. The sound alone awakens apprehension. Other images cause that apprehension to mount. The darkness is total, the darkness visible that Milton talks about. The earth is a deep, a sea with no bottom. This earth God has created is not inviting. It is intimidating, evoking a sense of dread that rises in our spine.

Why start here? It's a natural enough question. We do not want to be told that our world is, at base, a sea of chaos. Yet the story must begin here if we are to give it any credence at all. Imagine a depiction of the world that leaves out all the inchoate and threatening forces. No earthquakes, no hurricanes, no tsunamis, sunshine every day, California without the drought or the San Andreas Fault. Lovely, just lovely, but, sorry, not my world or yours. The biblical story either has to recognize the reality of *tohu vavohu* or acknowledge its irrelevancy to our world. It chooses the way of honesty and

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begins its depiction with a state that frightens and intimidates us. But then it rescues us from our anxiety. This chaotic world frightens **us**, but not God. The spirit of God is hovering above these chaotic waters, untroubled by their depth, comfortable in the absoluteness of their darkness. The *tohu vavohu* seems native ground to God. And that is good enough for us. The reality of the chaos has been recognized but not its independence of God or its malignity. God is in its midst, unruffled, unperturbed. We may draw a deep breath again.

Then comes the first unique act of creation itself. Light flashes into the darkness, God splitting reality into two realms of darkness and light. I'm not going to spend much attention on the acts of creation. They are familiar to you, light, heavens, and earth. Rather I want to focus our attention to what may almost seem an afterthought to these massive acts of world formation. After that first astonishing day when the most creative element, light, enters the world, the poet says, "And there was evening, and there was morning, one day." Listen again. "There was evening, and there was morning, one day." Take a moment to pay attention to how that makes you feel. There is something very calming about it, isn't there? Peaceful. A simple rhythm that reaches within us to soothe and quiet. This is the rhythm of our breath or perhaps a gentle walk, the rhythm of the breaking waves as we stand on the shore, rising, cresting, falling along the shore, the rhythm, we might go still further, of Jesus stilling the storm and stepping out on the waters. Among all the images in the poetry of creation, this is perhaps the most important to us and the greatest gift of God. It doesn't **tell** us how we should relate to this world of creation that God is undertaking. It places us right in the middle of it. One day, your day, this day, at peace with the world, confident in the creative activity of God, breathing in, breathing out, sharing the rhythm of all creation, each new day still one day, participating in the goodness of God's creation. What sort of a world do we inhabit? Well, at its heart it is like this, "There was evening, there was morning, one day."

"Oh," you may be thinking, "yes, I can feel the rhythm of that line. It is beautiful and very peaceful." But this beautiful line does not seek our aesthetic response but searches for something still deeper. This world evoked by that one day is our world, the world God created and the world in which we live. It is not too much to say that it is God's initial great gift to us, to live in such a world.

Yet we may also pull back from embracing this world because it may seem naïve or simplistic, despite the acknowledgment of *tohu vavohu*. This has been a discouraging time of violence and threat internationally, of injustice and division internally, even mounting concern about the endangerment of the natural world by global warming, instance after instance of that one day we are given being riven with turmoil and renewed, intensified apprehension.

None of these threats to the peacefulness of God's creation can be denied or ignored due to our fear or desire to avert our eyes from unpleasantness. We can't use the optimism of the biblical story, its deep confidence in God's goodness and creativity, to

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mask the real problems that distort God's creation. This story is not given us to allow us to delude ourselves. Rather, it challenges us to address the distortions. When human beings are explicitly introduced into the story, it is said that they are created in the image of God. We are the images of a creative God who seeks to recreate that wholesome rhythm of the one day on every day, yesterday, today, tomorrow. We are the image of that God and we are given a responsibility to have dominion over this creation in that image. Dominion does not bestow free rein for every imaginable whim but it requires us to act as God would act in maintaining the order of the day. This biblical story is not escapist literature. It is deeply self-involving, in both the goodness of creation and also in healing the wounds inflicted on the world.

One final and all-important note. The promise of God that is implied in the goodness of creation and that finds expression in the evening and morning, one day is never revoked. God has not changed the nature of the world God created. On the seventh day, the last day, God is portrayed at rest, surrounding the world, God alone. The whole of the created order is surrounded and infused with God's creative being. Even as we recognize the distortions that we have introduced into God's world, we dare not lose confidence that this is still God's world, still the day that God created light. If we abandon this story or fail to let it seize us as it wants, then there is only hopelessness and a sense of being lost in an alien world. Creation is not the only source of our hope. A still greater hope is to be found in the redemption of this world through Jesus Christ. But creation is the original gift, the original blessing. Thanks be to God who leads us to live in hope and trust this one day that God has given us.

Amen