

January 8, 2012
Baptism of Jesus, B
Genesis 1:1-5

The name for this first Sunday after Epiphany is Baptism of Jesus. It is the Sunday each year when the church contemplates the event of Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan by John. One of the suggested readings for today was the account of that moment, as told at the beginning of Mark's gospel. This congregation has frequently held baptisms on this day – some of you may be wondering where the babies are this morning! In preparation for Baptism of Jesus Sunday Paul Merritt, our Director of Music, picked a rich treasure of music focusing on baptism, and David Pederson, our lay liturgist, who wrote his own prayers for our use today, focussed on the same theme.

The only person not on board with all this baptism stuff was me! Weeks ago I decided I was going to preach on Genesis 1 – as you just heard read. The only problem is that I didn't flag that decision to other interested parties! So we have a delightful mix this morning of the traditional – baptism of Jesus – and the not-so-traditional – the creation story. Well, I shouldn't say 'not-so-traditional', because the text from Genesis 1 is one of the texts for this Sunday, probably because it focuses on the creation of light – and we are now in the season of light, the season after Epiphany. Be that as it may, this is my way of explaining to you why we have two perfectly good themes for this morning: baptism and creation.

A couple of months ago I had a disturbing conversation with one of my daughters, Norah. She's the deep thinker in our family and she sure was thinking deeply back in the fall. We were sitting at the table and she put this question to me right out of the blue: "You don't believe in dinosaurs, do you Mom?"

You don't believe in dinosaurs, do you, Mom? That is an absolutely brilliant question for a fifteen year old who is trying to sort out the relationship between faith and science. It also broke my heart in two – and I must tell you that I have Norah's permission to be sharing this with you now.

It's a brilliant question because it shows that Norah has grasped the prevailing cultural debate, largely being waged south of the border, but prevalent also in Canada thanks to the influence of television, the debate going on right now about evolution. Protestant fundamentalists, who insist that the bible is to be read literally as if it were a history book, have staked out a position we now call Creationism, in which they insist that the world was created exactly as it is described in our text for today, in six days and then God rested.

On the other side of the debate we have the evolutionists, stretching right back to Darwin and possibly beyond him, who hold that evolution is a process, which stretches over vast periods of time, and which gradually modifies organisms with an accumulation of mutations and adaptations. This view has expanded to include the Big Bang Theory about the ultimate origins of the universe as well, so it encompasses astronomy, and physics as well as biology, geology and anthropology.

Norah's question is brilliant, obviously, because it shows that she is aware of this debate and is trying to sort out where she stands within it.

But you know it broke my heart! Because she has unwittingly accepted the fundamentalists' point-of view – that you can't be a Christian and an evolutionist. According to them it's either Jesus or the dinosaurs – but not both. Norah knows I'm on team Jesus, so she was just checking in with me about the dinosaur part: You don't believe in dinosaurs, do you Mom?

Periodically through my preaching career I have been asked to give a sermon on evolution. I really love getting requests for sermon subjects, and I usually move pretty quickly to respond when I am nudged – but I have to tell you, I have never preached on this stuff before. That's the chief reason I decided to preach on Genesis this morning rather than the Baptism of Jesus – I've preached that every year on this Sunday since I was ordained!

I have been avoiding tackling this one, probably because it has become so polarized and emotional in some circles. It almost seems to have the stature of testimony or confession – like being hauled up before a judge and being instructed to tell the truth: creation or evolution? And those who are asking the question are quite prepared to impose the strongest sentence on you if you answer the wrong way: you are not a good Christian – or even a Christian at all, in their view - if you hold with evolution.

How did this get so polarized? And does it have to be this way? Why can't we have dinosaurs and creation, too?

To help me puzzle this out I turned to one of the most brilliant Old Testament scholars of our day, Walter Brueggemann (1). He gave me an insight which I think is very helpful and I would like to share it with you – with due credit to him.

He says that “the central concern [of the first 11 chapters of Genesis] is with the large issue of the relation of creator and creature.” Now that doesn't sound like much, but when he teases it out, it is golden. Brueggemann says that the author of Genesis resisted two other distinct views of reality which he or she could have used in telling the story of the beginning of the earth. The first is the ‘mythological’ view.

I don't know if you've ever heard of the Enuma Elish. It is the Babylonian creation myth which predates our Israelite creation myth by about a thousand years. Listen to a little smidgen of it:

When the sky above was not yet named
and the earth beneath did not yet bear a name
and the primeval Apsu who begat them
and chaos, Tiamat, the mother of them both
their waters were mingled together and no field was formed,
no marsh was to be seen
when of the gods none had been called into being.... (2)

It's pretty cool to hear aloud words that are probably almost 3,600 years old! What characterizes this Babylonian myth is that it is a story about the gods: Apsu and Tiamat, and others, who

weren't yet called into being. It is "a mythological perception of reality which assumes that all the real action is with the gods and creation in and of itself has no significant value." (p. 12) Clearly our creation story in Genesis 1 is not mythological like that – there is only one God, and the real action is on earth, not in heaven.

Walter Brueggemann continues, and says that the other view of reality that the author of Genesis had to resist was what he calls the "scientific view, which assumes that the world contains its own mysteries and can be understood in terms of itself without any transcendent referent." Talk to the new atheists today and you'll quickly realize that this is how they see the world: that's it. What you see is what you get. There is nothing beyond the physical universe, and everything is ultimately explicable with rules of cause and effect. Anything we don't understand we just haven't figured out yet – but we will.

Genesis doesn't take either of those positions. It doesn't see this world as a shadow of a more real world where the gods play, nor does it see this world as all there is, take it or leave it. Walter Brueggemann says that the author of Genesis displays "bold intellectual effort" and "believing passion" in creating a third option, a new way of understanding reality – well, new about 2600 years ago (p. 13). He calls it 'covenantal' – from the word Covenant. The creator and creation are in relationship with each other. Neither can be understood apart from the other.

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 SWEEPED OVER THE FACE OF THE WATERS. THEN GOD SAID, LET THERE BE LIGHT, AND THERE WAS LIGHT.

Everything comes from God; everything belongs to God. But what is created is distinct from God – we can transgress, we can rebel, we can fail – as we do pretty quickly in Chapter 3, when Adam takes that disobedient but succulent bite of fruit. But there is beautiful freedom there – we are not tied to God's will, however, we are aware of God's will.

What Brueggemann so deftly highlights, I think, is the suppleness inherent in this covenantal understanding of creation. Because creation comes into being when God speaks, AND GOD SAID...., Brueggemann calls us – calls everything "God's speech-creatures" (p. 24). Speech-creatures – like breaths of air, like shreds of the Spirit of God, created to exist in harmony with the One who created us. I like this so much better than either of the other two options our somewhat materialistic and dogmatic age presents: simplistic creationism or empty evolution.

So, where does this land us, on January 8, 2012? Remember Norah and her honest and perplexed question to her mother, "you don't believe in dinosaurs, do you?"

I wish I had read Walter Brueggemann before she asked me that. But if she were to ask me again I'd say this: Dear Child, speech-creature of God, of course I believe in dinosaurs, because I believe in the covenant of creation. I believe that love underlies our universe. I believe that everything that science can discover is comprehensible because love made it so. I believe that even though life is often confusing and sometimes painful we are always held in the hand of God, the same God who created everything and breathed it into being – allowing it to evolve and

change, to grow or to fail, to rebel or to return worship and praise. I believe that the joy in your heart is a reflection of the joy at the heart of everything, because God made everything well, and it is truly good. Do not succumb to simplistic, mechanistic understandings of reality – allow room for the mystery at the heart of it all to speak to you – as it speaks to everything that is made, speaks, and calls everything into existence by the force of that mighty, creative word. IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD, AND THE WORD WAS GOD...

IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED HEAVEN AND EARTH....

In the beginning, and in the end, is God, who covenants to be with us and for us. And that is very good. Amen.