

“In the Image of God”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
e-Worship 10:30 am
June 6, 2020

Genesis 1:1-2:2
Matthew 28:16-20

Today is Trinity Sunday, and it's a funny thing that what we start with is a scripture that comes far before Jesus walked the earth, and much earlier than the Holy Spirit descended on the church that day of Pentecost. We begin in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth.

Before I say much more, let me tell you that we are mistaken when we read this creation story as a science text, or a history text. If you do that, you can pretty quickly write the bible off as fake news: what we know now about the Big Bang Theory, and evolution, and of galaxies that stretch far beyond Earth's orbit still contain the wonder and awe of God's design, I believe, but do not quite fit within the timeline of Genesis. The cosmology in Genesis describes a dome which God put in the sky, which separated the waters above from the waters below-- the sky, in primordial history, was believed to be made of water, and there was a dome made of-- I don't know, prehistoric plexiglass or something-- that held the sky waters from the earth waters. If you watched the space rocket launch last week pierce the sky, you know that theory's pretty useless. Instead, we must read this Genesis creation story as a theological text-- that is, it tells us about God-- and an anthropological text-- that is, it tells us about God's people. Not only that, it places humans in an intricate web of creation that is so much bigger than we are.

The poetry of this text is also beautiful. If you feel wrecked by the chaos of these times, there is something reassuringly lovely about the precise rhythms set forth in this text: “And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day.... And there was evening, and there was morning, the second day.... And there was evening, and there was morning, the third day.... And God saw that it was good.” These phrases get repeated throughout the text, setting boundaries over time and space, showing that out of chaos-- in the beginning, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the earth- God creates order.

As the coronavirus stretches its tentacles across this country and world, and threatens to grab hold of our region in another peak, it feels chaotic and we want order. We want evidence of God's design: “What's the plan here, God?” As the streets of our country erupt in anger and lament, as divisions fracture our sense of community, we want to know that God is in control. There were at least 4 bear sightings in Leonia in the past 4 days, as well as a bear who took a dip in someone's swimming pool in Cliffside Park last week. Murder Hornets have invaded the West Coast. On Wednesday there was an earthquake in California, and at one point last week I opened the news to find that there was a meteor the size of a football field heading towards

earth (but you can breathe, the NASA Asteroid Watch Widget last night said that it was set to pass us by today, avoiding a collision by nearly 2 million miles). What is going on?!

Amidst all this chaos, Chris and I tried to have a conversation mid-week about what our family would do on Saturday, which is the only day the three of us have off of work and school together. “Since it’ll be raining,” Chris said, “we should plan to be indoors.” *“It’s not going to rain!”* I rebutted, and pulled out my phone to show her on my weather app a Saturday that promised sunny skies with a few bouncy clouds. “That’s not what my phone says,” Chris answered, and pulled out her phone-- the same smartphone, with the same app-- which showed a Saturday with an angry cloud with a lightning bolt coming out of it. We looked at each other and laughed, partly because I tend to be an optimist and she tends to be a pessimist, but also because of the larger conversations our country is having. “It looks like you’re getting White Saturday and I’m getting Brown Saturday,” Chris lamented.

Now I know that people in the same house experience this phenomenon all the time-- in this moment, our phones weren’t making grand commentaries on race in America. Racism in America is no joke, and it’s something my eyes have been opened to as the Spirit has guided me, and I have learned to listen to and believe friends and family members who are people of color. These days we are hearing heart-wrenching cry of a nation that has missed a core value of our beginnings: we are made in the image of God, in the image of God we were created, male and female we were created. This statement has a mandate for how we must treat one another. But far too often, we have obscured, disrespected and even abused the image of God in one another. It is one thing to love people equally on a person-to-person level, regardless of race. I like to believe that is true for us as individuals in the church. But there are deeper structures that deny the sacred worth God has put into each person, and these structures keep certain people, because of their race, from living fullness of life. If you don’t believe this, then let’s talk.

I wonder if the Christian idea of Trinity might help us here. The Doctrine of the Trinity actually did not come to be until the 3rd Century, even though the Bible tells us about God, about Jesus, and about the Holy Spirit. Tertullian, a prominent theologian who was from the city of Carthage, which was in the Northern Africa, came up with the idea of the Trinity-- that God comes to us in three persons.

You may not think that any part of the Trinity except God the Creator shows up until we get to the New Testament. But in fact, they are there-- you just have to have your eyes open to them. . In the Creation story, the Holy Spirit shows up in the second verse of the first chapter: “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.” It helps if you know a little Hebrew-- then you can see that the word for Wind is also the word for Spirit. In that first act of Creation, the Spirit is at work, brooding over the primordial chaos and helping to form it into something that can give and sustain life.

Some have said that when God declares, “Let *us* create humankind in *our* own image, the reason God uses the plural pronouns is because God is speaking to the Trinitarian community. I am not sure about that-- others say God is speaking in the “royal we”-- as in, God is so big, God encompasses all things, so the first person *I* is just too small to contain God.

What I like to think about for the existence of Jesus in this beginning is in words-- God spoke, and it came to be. The Gospel of John begins with the same phrase as Genesis: “In the beginning,” John says, and continues, “was the *word*, and the word was with God, and the Word was God.” John goes on to show us that Jesus is the *word* made flesh, to dwell among us.

There are expressions of the Trinity that are hidden; hidden in the texts of the bible, but also hidden because God’s people, who recorded their understandings of how God was at work in the world, just did not see how present the Trinity was in their lives. But the more we are trained to look for these persons of the Trinity, the more likely we are to notice them and to be changed by them. And, the more we look to see the persons in our society which may be harder to see and understand, the more we will be changed to see the image of God in those people, a clearer view of who God is than what we can come up with on our own.

I had my first Black teacher when I was in the 7th grade. Her name was Ms. Jordan and she taught Social Studies. It was an election year. We had to make campaign posters as an assignment. Since neither of my parents were political, I made a poster for the person my grandparents were voting for without thinking anything about it. Ms. Jordan walked between the desks as we were making our posters. When she got to my desk, she paused. “Leah,” she told me, “based on the kinds of comments you make in my class, I’m a little surprised that you’re making this poster.” I was so amazed she had listened to and thought about my comments in class, like they really mattered. And for the first time in my life, I took an inventory of what I held as valuable and compared it to what the politicians running stood for and saw, indeed, that I should be making a different poster. I am so thankful to Ms. Jordan for awakening my political consciousness. I know I grew in important ways from Ms. Jordan, and since her class I have realized that my education is not complete when I am only learning from teachers who match my race and culture. When I got to seminary, there were standard texts every seminarian gets handed to read. Almost all of them were written by White, male theologians, usually from Germany. To balance that out, anytime I had a choice on who to read, I would choose a person of color or a woman. If I am only taught what God looks like by a White person, then I am missing a huge piece of who God is.

We worship a God who appears in the Bible sometimes as a police officer, making sure people follow the law and following through with consequences if they don’t. We also worship a God who shows up as the man who gets pulled out of the car and has his neck kneeled upon. This is the crucified Christ, condemned by the law of religious authority and killed at the hands of state authority. Recognizing the different ways God shows up in the Bible helps us to see the image of God in different people, with vastly different experiences, we meet in our lives.

As it turned out, it was sunny on Saturday. And, at one point in the day the dome of the earth opened up and the waters poured upon us. But as it turned out, the rain wasn’t bad. It was

actually cooling, and after it fell, a heavy mugginess that had been in the air before lifted. I was standing outside when it rained, and though I had the option to go inside, I let the rain drench me, praying that it could be cleansing waters, a renewal of baptismal promise and a coming of the Spirit to once again make all things new. There is beauty and goodness in brown and black lives. Brown Saturday turned out to not be a bad Saturday after all.