

Let me tell you about the sermon I was going to preach today. I had it all worked out in my head and it was very good. Or at least I thought it was. I looked at this text about a month ago, determined it was sufficiently intriguing that I wanted to preach on it, selected a title from within the text, because that is frequently the safest bet when one hasn't yet written the sermon, and put it in my mind to percolate for the month. My plan was that this week, I would have the stories selected, the basic arc of the sermon determined, and all that would remain would be for me to begin my reading on Monday, determine if there were concepts that needed further fleshing out in the teaching portions of the sermon, and put fingertips to keys and it would all just flow out. Many of you have asked how I work on my sermons, what my process is, and in a perfect world, this is what happens.

Last Sunday night, I watched a news special on NBC about bullying and I thought to myself, "this is just perfect; this sermon is coming along beautifully, I've just been handed an illustration!" The arc was to begin with object lessons about the effects of denigrating people or just treating them badly, bend toward an object lesson in Trinitarian theology and what it means to be in God's image, it is trinity Sunday, after all, and curve finally toward a baptismal analogy to hammer home that our identity and our worth derives from the value that God places on us. It was, to my mind, a perfectly fine sermon. And then I began to read about our text for today.

When I was in seminary, I had a running joke with a friend of mine about how often a perfectly good sermon gets ruined by a little biblical study. It turns out that I could

preach that sermon that I was going to preach, but not from this text. Not, that is, if I wanted to be faithful to what the text meant to say.

I was talking to a friend of mine about this text and was concerned that I had misunderstood the author's intent, to which my friend replied, "Well it doesn't really matter what the author meant." My friend is an extremely good scholar, frankly a much better one than I am, and I take his point that it is almost impossible to know what someone writing 2500 years ago *meant* to say, but it does the Bible no justice if I just preach what I want and use the text as a springboard to my own bias. Here ends today's lesson in Biblical interpretation.

It does matter what the author intended, and so I'd like to spend some time telling you about some facets of this story that I found fascinating.

For starters, I know we know it but it bears repeating: this is not a story with any scientific background. I know it seems pedantic to say it. The battle lines have long since been drawn about evolution and creation. There is a political edge to discussion of Genesis 1 that frankly surprises me because if Genesis 1 is science, it's not very good science. I think we all know that or at least have a hunch about it. But what bears repeating is this: the author never intended that we should hold up Genesis 1 alongside evolutionary science and see a problem. This is not a story about the mechanics of creation. It is a theologian's story, and it is intended to tell us something about God and about how we relate to God.

It's a theologian's story. Genesis, along with the next four books of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament, was written by many authors. Many, many authors, actually. This is a very simple statement of a pretty complex hypothesis, but Genesis and

these other books are thought to be the product of four dominant strands of writing and thought that had four very distinct perspectives on faith, all complementary. That is, for instance, why if you keep reading in Genesis this week, you will immediately fall upon another creation story right on the heels of this one, and in many ways, it's the more familiar one: God formed the man out of dirt and later removed a rib to form the woman. But the text that we read this morning is written from what is called the priestly source. The priestly author was concerned to the point of obsession with order and right worship and I'll resist the urge to include a Presbyterian joke right here. The reason that this is important is that by analyzing the style and the manner of the text, we are able to know when it was likely written.

It is generally agreed that the story we read today was written when the Israelites were in slavery in Babylon. They had not honored their covenant relationship with God, they had entered into conflicting alliances and when their duplicitous dealings were discovered by their supposed allies, the mighty Babylonian army had crushed the Israelite army and their best and brightest had been dragged off into slavery in Babylon. And in the midst of this disorder and disharmony and general fear the priestly author penned these verses about the foundation of the world, God's creation of the universe, and sought to make answer to some pretty foundational questions facing the people of faith.

The questions weren't the ones we might expect based on our questions of the text. The questions weren't really about where we came from, how our flesh and blood was made, or where the sun and moon came from. The questions were more elemental.

To a displaced people, scattered and afraid, disheartened and lonely for their homeland, the questions were more likely along these lines:

“Do I still matter?”

“Is God still in charge of what’s going on?”

“What can I do with this mess that I’ve made of my life?”

To a displaced people, scattered and afraid, the theologians penned these verses to say something about God and how we relate to God.

How do the priests do this? How does the priests answer these tough questions?

By what was said and how it was said. What we say about God matters because that is how we give answer to the most important questions.

First, the priests address the question of chaos and disorder. We are not referring to garden variety chaos. This is not the junk drawer or the recalcitrant guest room closet. This is the very real fear that it will all fall apart. The Hebrew phrase doesn’t translate very well into English. The word is *tohuwabohu*, and it means formless, without order, nothingness... it’s bad stuff. And when God began creating, it was nothingness, oblivion, mess. And God orders the disorder. Above all this nothingness and chaos, God’s Spirit was hovering, or brooding.

Into all of this, God speaks order.

I wonder if this means as much to us as it surely did to those ancient Israelites? I wonder if our lives are such that this word carries as much comfort to us as it did to them? I wonder, and then I realize, most surely it must.

I spoke this past week with one of my dearest friends. She and her husband want terribly to have a child and beyond all expectations, she was twelve weeks pregnant until this week. Her voice was groggy in the phone message from the painkillers as she told me

her good news had turned to bad news during what should have been a routine ultrasound.

Does the word that God is brooding still over all that threatens to unravel in our lives carry good news to us? I believe it does. And I believe that you have seen it.

The Spirit of God was brooding over the waters, and then God began to create. And to read it, it must seem terribly monotonous. Over the six days God seems to do and redo the same work – one day the light is fixed, and then another day the sun and moon are instituted. One day the waters are separated and then another day the dry land is established. It all seems a bit much until one realizes there is a very clear pattern. It looks like this: on days one, two and three, God made places for things to be. On days four, five and six, God made the stuff to go in those places. So everything has a place, and everything is in its place. To the problem of chaos, of fearful disorder, God has instituted a carefully chosen, deliberately wrought, delicate balance of order. And into this painstakingly ordered world, where God has repeatedly identified what God has made as *good*, God makes humankind in the image of God and places us with dominion and a blessing.

One of the beauties of living our faith in Christ by struggling with the Bible is the infinite richness we may discover in the text. While I had one idea about what it means to be made in the image of God, and I can back it with other texts, the priestly author had a different idea about what it means. I, of course, wanted to revert to Trinitarian theology, to speak of what God's nature is and how we live lives pointing to that God. And I can make that case. But the priestly author has a different case to make, and their case bears hearing.

In the ancient world, it would be the practice of an emperor or king to place a statue or marker in outlying areas of what was generally *his* rule as a reminder to the people who might not see their sovereign with any degree of regularity or even at all, of who was in charge, of who the ultimate authority was. And when God creates the humans in God's image, and places them in God's creation as the marker, with dominion over all around them, it is with *purpose*.

God's purpose is that they, that we, should live as the marker's of God's order in the world. In the ancient world there were all sorts of creation narratives. One who wants to dig around in ancient near eastern creation epics will quickly find stories very similar to what we encounter in the Bible. And one will see where the gods whose creation activities are recounted then made slaves to do their bidding in the world. But not so with the story of God and us. God creates the world good and then places the humans in it to be God's agents of God's divine, good order.

If one is struggling for meaning in a foreign land, enslaved and marginalized, this is good news. If one is struggling for meaning in a common land, unchallenged and bored, this is good news. Who are we, O Lord, that thou art mindful of us?

God's creation. God's handiwork, given God's task.

Mind you, we are given dominion to work God's purpose. In that sense, God has drafted us to continue the work of caring for creation.

You and I aren't called to maintain the rigid order of the priestly narratives. The ritual provided the ethical framework in which they lived. We don't live in the same framework. Our world is different, our time is different, our task is different.

But this we have in common: the Word of God stands to provide us with meaning and purpose. To be in God's image is to have a task of bearing the good news that creative God has blessed us with dignity, intellect, and value.

That's the same whether we are in the sixth century BCE weeping for Zion by the waters of Babylon or trying to make sense of the very real complexities of life in the modern era where we consider chaos and disorder very differently from the ancients. The good news remains the same.

Which brings me back around to that sermon I wanted to preach. Does the word that God has a way in the world marked by a good order, where creation is valued, indeed called *good* have something to say to the problems of modern humankind? I think so.

We're not monoliths as Christians. One text doesn't say it all to us. We're free, indeed, we're expected to go beyond the boundaries of the texts as we encounter them to see the whole story of what God has done and is doing. So I understand that a creation theology that prizes above all else created order may not say that much to us in every moment of our lives. But there's more to this text. To the fear that chaos may reign, we know that God brings order out of chaos. To the fear that there is no meaning to what we are doing, we remember that God gave us purpose – *dominion* – was the word, and not to do whatever we please, but to work as God's agents in creation.

So let's come back around to that question of bullying. Where does it fit in God's created order? It doesn't.

Let's come back around to a popular notion that dominion means we can do whatever we want to creation. Where does that fit into God's painstakingly created order? It doesn't.

Let's come back around to the fears and loss of hope of those ancient unintentional immigrants to Babylon: afraid, abandoned, worried that God has finished with them. The priests penned these verses in God's name to say, "No. Wait. There's more. Don't despair. Don't give up hope. The God who orders the chaos has made a place for you in that order. You're going to be God's agents in the world to carry the good news of God's power and God's goodness forward."

God has a way for the world. That much is clear in the text. We may have to venture further a field in the Biblical text to discern what the totality of God's way in the world is. Indeed we should. In the ministry of Jesus we are told what God's way for the world is. It's the culmination of all that God has been saying from Genesis 1 through Job and the Psalmists and the prophets. It is the way of goodness, mercy, and generosity.

We will encounter tough questions in life:

"Do I still matter?"

"Is God still in charge of what's going on?"

"What can I do with this mess that I've made of my life?"

As the arc of our sermons, those sermons we preach through our living, bends its way in our worship toward the font where we make promises to each other, we are left with the simple task of being God's image, being God's marker to those who might see God rarely, if at all, of the good news. And it is very good.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.