

“Where Are You From?”

Genesis 1:24-2:3; Acts 4:1-3, 7-22

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Feast of the Holy Trinity

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When I meet someone, I suppose I ask this more than anything. I asked it of most all of you when I first met you. It’s a question I heard often, growing up. My grandparents would ask it of anyone they met. Wherever we met people who were new to us, the question would sooner or later be asked – Where are you from?

Ruth Carroll says that the common question in Virginia, where she grew up, was “Who are your people?” or “Who’s your family?” In Texas, the question became “Where are you from?” because in our history everyone was from somewhere else. Often in hearing of where people are from, I’ll identify some connection, some point of commonality – the same town, the same region, the same school, someone we both know, something of our origins that we hold in common. We’ll share origin stories.

Today’s reading from Genesis and Acts are origin stories — the origin story of humankind, and one of the origin stories of the church. It is a story that tells us where we’re from and as such, it offers us surprisingly rich soil in which to root our identities.

So, what do these stories tell us about where are we from?

We come from a God who sees. Seven times in this creation narrative from Genesis, God pauses to reflect on his work. “And God saw.” Well before God’s work is done, God steps back to behold all that is taking shape before his eyes.

God lingers over God's creation. God is not in a hurry, and God's interest in the world is far from utilitarian. God's is the gaze of the artist, keen, perceptive, and patient. God observes. God attends. God notices. We come from a God who pays delighted attention. God sees.

We come from a world that is good. Before there was evil, there was goodness. Before there was Original Sin, there was Original Blessing. Often in our rush to get our theologies properly lined-out, and our Fundamentalists sisters and brothers are quick to get us straight on the strict beliefs, we overlook that Genesis 1 is a chapter brimming with goodness and blessing. In fact, God pronounces blessing on the created order three times. He calls creation "good" and "very good" seven times.

In contrast for example, there are many who believe that the essence of the universe, where we come from, is violence and conflict and competition and they believe that for us to pretend otherwise is to go against the basic nature of reality. Theologian Miroslav Volf writes that they say, "Violence had the first word in history; it will have the last word – and most words in between too." But the biblical vision says, "Violence is not human destiny because the God of peace is the beginning and the end of human history" (*Exclusion and Embrace*, p.300-301).

At the same time, there are many who believe that our origin is in sin. They skip over this part of Genesis and go straight to the story of the Fall, which comes later in chapter 3. Their emphasis is on how bad we are and how bad the world is, and they say we should focus our lives on getting out of here and get to heaven. The practical result is that if God's emphasis is on us being spiritual and getting to heaven, then what goes on in this world is not very important and has historically been kind of left vacated. The resulting vacuum has in turn been filled with the

ideologies of competition, violence, and conflict, “a Hobbesian myth of struggle of everybody against everybody” (Volf, p.300).

But this old biblical story tells us something different. We come from a good creation. Genesis affirms the world as the good creation of the good God. All that is, is good. As it says at the end of the story, “God saw everything God had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

We come from a God who makes new things. According to Genesis, God created something new each day for six days. God was an innovator at the world’s beginning, calling forth beautiful things that didn’t exist until God called them. Frederick Buechner used to say, “Using the same old materials of earth, air, fire, and water, every twenty-four hours God creates something new out of them. If you think you’re seeing the same show all over again seven times a week, you’re crazy. Every morning you wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And *the you* that wakes up was never the same before and will never be the same again, either.”

We come from the likeness of God. We are created in the *Imago Dei*, the image of God, is how the scholars put it. But notice in the key verse for this morning, Genesis 1:26, God says, “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.” The pronouns are plural. Whatever else this might mean, I think it says that we are created for relationship and community because we come from a relational God. As an isolated individual we’re forgetting where we came from and missing out on who God created us to be. We are created in the image of the Trinitarian God.

To be created in the image of the Trinitarian God is to be created in and for community, relationship, and being neighbors with one another and the world. We

are not created to believe that this world is all about me and I don't need, and I don't want anyone else, and I'm hostile and threatened by anyone who does not fit in my so-called little world. And it also means that God is not "mine" to decide who God is in my own isolated, subjective inner being. God is known among us, in our relationships, and in the world. God is more than and bigger than, than what "I" think or want.

We come from a God who shares and is open. God's very Trinitarian being is about creating new relationships and being open and inclusive to receiving others. This God does not build walls but creates and includes new relationships. God participates in life together.

This Triune God we worship and follow and imitate is love. It is not simply that God loves. But God is love. And this love takes a trinitarian form, therefore the love that the One God is, always already includes love of "the other."

This God who creates because of love, also redeems. God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit redeems broken creation out of love, and further, this God who is love indwells human beings and all creation. Volf says that part of what this means is "though completely rooted in God – all things are from God, through God, and to God – the Christian life is not exclusively oriented toward God. Instead, having God behind, underneath, and in them [us] Christians are oriented toward the world, participating in God's mission to suffuse the world with God's love and make it God's and creatures' home" (p. 307).

We come from a God who rests. Honoring this is no small feat in workaholic America, where our value as persons is based upon our productivity and our achievements. And it is certainly not easy for our busy congregation. God takes a Sabbath; all the while we justify our ways of our constant busy-ness. The

Sabbath is the only thing in the creation account God called holy. Perhaps we might better know this God who created us by spending some holy Sabbath time resting.

If we want a fuller and complete picture of where we came from, we look to Jesus. Jesus shows us what God's creation is supposed to be. Jesus Christ, who we believe is the second person of the Trinity, came in the flesh to show us how to really look at each other and truly see. How to enjoy a good world, to watch the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and how to devote time with good food and good drink and good friends in good conversation. Jesus created newness and calls us to participate in what Paul called the new creation. In Jesus we can start over and learn how to bless and heal, share and be open to others. Jesus shows us who God is and where we come from.

Which brings us to one of our other origin stories. This one from the book of Acts. It shows us **we come from a God of boldness**.

The great biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann, who died June 5, and with whom it was my great-and-never-dull-honor to study Isaiah back in 1985 at Columbia Presbyterian Seminary, noted that Pentecost provided the early church with the guts, the chutzpah, it needed to challenge the empire. It all started at Pentecost but continued throughout the book of Acts.

Brueggemann wrote, "The book of Acts begins in Pentecost when the wind breaks out in many languages and many tongues, a breaking of old tribal patterns of convenience. When the church knows the wind-spirit, what happens is that it has the courage and the freedom and the energy to take on the exploitative forms of empire that keep people disadvantaged. So, in the book of Acts the early Christians were regularly hauled into court to appear before officials of the Roman Empire,

because the status quo Roman Empire feared the inbreaking of the transformative power of gospel people. In the book of Acts the fearful crowd accused the early church that it was ‘turning the world upside down.’ Everything felt topsy-turvy where Jesus had come; the old patterns of control and certitude no longer worked.”

Brueggemann continues, “We are in a like situation. We live now in a society of greed, indifference, and violence. It is a time in which the people of Jesus are called to stand in the spirit against the order of the day. ... This is a time when the people of Jesus are coming to terms with our odd identity because the gospel, mandated right there in the book of Acts, is to turn the world right side up. The wind unleashes a mighty force into the world that the old powers of status quo never welcome.”

Our reading from Acts in chapter 4 is the continuing story of the chutzpah, the boldness, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Wind, gave to the church. Peter and John simply heal a man but the Powers-that-Be arrest them for turning things topsy-turvy. They’re arrested for doing good, for showing mercy. And in a system where the profits and power are in keeping people down and in despair, that is downright subversive. But after arresting them, the Religious/Political Powers don’t know what to do with them except warn them, intimidate them, and threaten them. Peter and John reply with boldness, “Whether it’s right in God’s eyes to listen to you rather than to God, you decide. As for us, there’s no question—we can’t keep quiet about what we’ve seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Hear me, this morning. Our origin story tells us God sees a world that is good, and who makes all things new. This God, who is the very essence of love always embraces the Other in generous hospitable love. This is our origin story, and it is our calling. It is where we come from, and it is where we are going. We

cannot keep quiet about such a God. And what the Powers-That-Be want to do about it, they have to decide.

This is a time of soldiers marching, drones whirring overhead and unheard-of levels of surveillance and control, of missiles and bombs, all the way from Gaza to Ukraine to Los Angeles to Tehran and Tel Aviv. The goodness and newness of a loving God, of justice and mercy and peace seems more distant than ever. But this is also a time for us to be witnesses, to boldly point to what we have seen and heard. In our lives all things are from God, through God, and to God, therefore, having God behind, underneath, and in us, we participate in God's mission to suffuse the world with God's love and make it a good and safe place.

My other old teacher that year in Atlanta, Fred Craddock, taught New Testament and preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, had been a part-time volunteer chaplain at a small, rural hospital out in the country from Atlanta. While he was on call, he received word that a baby had been born, so he made his way down to the maternity ward. Behind the glass the newborn was red-faced and squalling. Clustered at the glass was a bunch of people pointing, taking pictures, and laughing. Dr. Craddock learned it was a baby girl, Elizabeth, and the young father was standing over in the corner by himself. "You the father? Don't worry about the crying and red face. It's for her to open her lungs and get her voice going. She's not sick."

"Oh, I know she's not sick," the father said. "But she's mad as hell. Pardon me, Reverend."

Craddock said, "That's okay. Why is she mad?"

He said, “Well, wouldn’t you be mad? One minute you’re with God in heaven and the next minute you’re in Georgia.”

“You believe she was with God before she came here?”

“Oh, sure.”

Craddock asked, “Do you think she’ll remember?”

He said, “Well, that’s up to her mother and me. It’s up to the church. We’ve got to see that she remembers, because if she forgets, she’s a goner” (from *Craddock Stories*, p. 126-127).

That young father had it right. Our job is to help each other, this town, and beyond, to remember where we’re from. Otherwise, we’re all goners.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.