

Pericope Study Notes
Sunday of the Holy Trinity - Year A (2011)

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Genesis 1.1-2.4a

As God was beginning to create the skies and the land, the land was a wasteland and a desert, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the Breath of God beat heavily on the waters. And God said, "Let light be." And light was. And God saw the light for its goodness. And God made a division between the light and the darkness. And God called to the light, "Day!" And to the darkness, He called, "Night!" And evening was. And morning was. One day...

...And God said, "Let's make a human in our image, like our likeness. And let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the skies, and over the beasts, and over all the land, and over all the creeping things that creep on the land." And God created the human in his image--he created it in the image of God. He created them male and female. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Bear fruit and become many! And fill the land and bring it into submission! And rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the skies and over all the living things that creep on the land."

And God said, "Look! I give to you all of the plants giving seed that are on the face of all the land, and all the trees that are in it; the fruit of the tree giving seed is for you, to be for food. And to all the beasts of the land, and to all the birds of the skies, and to all the things that creep on the land that have breath in them, will be all the green plants for food." And so it was. And God saw all that he made and, look: Very good! And evening was. And morning was. A sixth day.

And the skies and the land and all their forces were finished. And God finished his work on the seventh day. And he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he did. And God blessed the seventh day and he made it holy, because he rested from all the work that he did when God created.

These are the generations of the skies and the land as they were being created.

Literary Form: The Creation story of Genesis 1 is a narrative in form, but a strange one. It has very poetic elements, and is carefully structured.

Authorship: In the context of the documentary hypothesis, the Priestly author has been attached to it. As such, the careful and repetitive structure, the importance of an ordered creation, and God's impetus is vital here.

Sitz im Leben: While an earlier form of Genesis 1 may have had its place as a cultic recitation of the creation epic, its cultic function is no longer evident in the received text, which now functions as the beginning of both the Priestly author's corpus and of the whole Biblical corpus itself. This bit of primeval history needs to be considered both as a story in its own right and in relation to the rest of the Bible.

Comment: Throughout the (partial) translation above, I use “skies” and “land” for consistency and to remind us that ancient Hebrew cosmology was rather different than ours; “skies” and “heavens” and the “furthest-flung reaches of the cosmos” would have all had the same meaning for the ancients. So, too, did the “firmament”--a dome that held the waters above the heavens up there where they belonged (hence the blue sky, and the origin of rain)--make sense to the Hebrew, whereas we have sent rockets and shuttles up there and of course found no such thing. Entering the world of Genesis 1 requires some degree of imagination. How can we get our congregation to engage their imagination during the sermon?

The title of this passage actually comes at its end in verse 2:4a: “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth as they were being created.” We can compare this with other Priestly narratives where he uses a similar title: Gen 5:1 “This is the book of the generations of Adam”; Gen 6:9 “These are the generations of Noah”; Gen 10:1 “These are the generations of the sons of Noah--Shem, Ham, and Japheth.”; etc. I find it interesting that the author uses multiple metaphors for each ordered stage of creation. During the narrative, they are “days.” But in the narrative’s summary/title, they are “generations.” Could talking about the generations of creation give us a break from arguments about the literal or figurative meaning of “days?”

I translated the first verse strangely: “As God was beginning to create the heavens and the earth...” rather than the traditional “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Either is a grammatically valid interpretation. Some commentators (von Rad) have suggested that the second, statement form is appropriate since this should be a clear statement that God is creator. Others (Westermann) point out that this is eisegetical. He concludes that the latter statement is valid by comparing it with the language of the Babylonian creation epic, but I see his same evidence as pointing toward the first option. In short, there’s no conclusive interpretation here. What would it mean to hear the opening of this passage *in media res*? i.e. How does it change our understanding of this whole passage if God has already begun creation as the story begins?

Tohu and bohu, formless and void, are not quite *ex nihilo*. The word *tohu* is used clearly in other places to denote a wasteland or desert. *Bohu* is only used with *tohu* and its exact meaning is unclear. This is not to negate the doctrine of creation out of nothing, but that category is a philosophic one that arises from Aristotelian thought, and the question would have meant little to the Hebrew author. What is trying to be expressed here is a fearful beginning. Wasteland and desert are frightening categories; so too is darkness and deep. The next phrase might also fit into this category. As the passage continues, the creation happens through a variety of verbs: Divided between (*hivdil*), brought forth (*yatsa*), called (*qara*) etc. These are verbs of ordering. In other Ancient Near Eastern contexts, there was a clear understanding that life depended on this cosmic order (In Egypt, this was even formalized into the doctrine of *ma’at*.) It is unclear how strong this sense was in ancient Israel, but one can bet it was present at some level, and that the author of Genesis 1 is drawing on this. Ramírez-Muñoz sees this as the crux of the creation narrative. “Seen in its social and political context, the

Biblical story of Creation is not a neutral declaration, but rather an expression of resistance with the goal of fomenting hope in the situation of suffering during the exile and of creating a vision of life that contrasts with that of the people's neighbors." What would it mean to look at fearfulness and orderliness as opposites? At fear and life as opposites?

Finally, finally, the reason that this text shows up on Trinity Sunday! "The Spirit of God hovered over the deep." The Hebrew word/concept *ruach*, like the Greek *pneuma*, can mean spirit, or wind, or breath. (No wonder, in John's Gospel a few weeks ago, Jesus *breathes* the Spirit onto his disciples!) Commentators (Westermann for example) argue, somewhat convincingly, that this is a strong, powerful tornado of wind, almost divine in its strength, that stirs the waters--a third frightening image to match the first two. (They take the second part of *ruach elohim* to mean *of godlike strength* rather than just *of God*.) But the word *Elohim* is used so often throughout this passage--and once already in verse 1--to simply mean "God" that it's difficult to wipe out that possibility altogether. Is this a wind from God, a sign of God's presence amidst the fearful chaos of creation's beginnings? Or can we go so far as to take this as God's own Spirit, active already in pulling at the strings of Creation as God begins to speak? I'd guess the ancient Hebrew author would direct us away from this leap; I'd also guess the modern Christian can't help but see the Spirit active here.

And the Word of God? The verb used most throughout this passage is "speak" (*'amar*, usually in the consecutive imperfect *way'omer*) with the verb "called" (*qara*) also frequently used. God speaks and it is so; God's Word (literally) does the creating. Can we really see Trinitarian language here? From what vantage point(s)?

In fact, the word "create" (*bara*) is a special word used very seldom throughout this passage. It shows up first in verse 1, then not again until verse 27 when God "creates" the human. To put it another way, there is only one subject of the verb--God--and only two objects--the generality of all creation, and humankind. In fact, in Psalm 104, the verb is used to describe what happens when breath is put into the body; God's "creating" is a life-giving creation. While I fear putting humanity on a pedestal above the rest of creation--and the implications of that for creation care--it's worth wondering why we are given this special language of creation.

As we talk about creation care, it's important to consider the dominion/submission language. Where Genesis talks about dominion or ruling, it clearly is eluding to the rulership it knows--that of a king, a sovereign protector. The ancient seal of the kings of Israel shows the king standing on the neck of a (live) deer with one foot, while wrestling with a lion. This is a clear subjugation of the people under the foot of the king--but with the important function also of protecting them from the enemy. The rule's will is supreme, but also protects. As we talk about creation care in the context of this passage, our understanding of dominion CAN include real subjugation. (In fact, the meaning of the word translated above as "bring it into submission" can even go as far as "put it in bondage under you.") But it must also include protection and care--not exploitation. How can we hold real authority in tension with real caregiving?

One last comment: Much has been made of the mix between singular and plural verbs used for God in this passage, particular in verses 26-27. This is probably another reason this was chosen for Trinity Sunday--but again, not something the author would have seen there. The "royal plural" has been suggested, but there's absolutely no evidence for this in Hebrew, so probably not. We don't know why the switch happens. Interestingly, nobody much picks up on the switch between singular and plural for the human(s) that God creates; translations usually pluralize without batting an eye. God creates one singular "Adam" and creates them (plural) male and female. One commentator picks it up; Ellen Frankel [un]helpfully says "In the beginning, Shekhinah, the Holy-One-Who-Dwells-in-This-World, spins the world into being: light, water, earth, heavenly bodies, seed-bearing plants, sea creatures, birds, animals--and *Adam*, the only creature cast in the divine image, double-gendered and unique." Dwelling on all this will probably only give you a headache.

Psalm 8

For the director of the Gittith-choir: A song of David.

Refrain

*Yahweh our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
The name which places your splendor in all the heavens!*

Verse

*From the mouth of children and nursing babies
you laid the foundations of strength, because of your rivals
To destroy the enemy and the avenger.
Because I see your heavens--the work of your fingers--
The moon and the stars which you set in their courses:
"What is a person, that you remember him?
And the child of a human, that you care about him?"
You made him have almost as much as the gods
And you crown him with abundance and glory.
You gave him rulership over the works of your hands;
You set everything under his feet.
Sheep and cattle--all of them,
And also the beasts of the field,
The birds of the sky and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes through the ways of the seas---*

Refrain

*Yahweh our Lord,
How majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Form and Sitz im Leben: This is a psalm, obviously, and one of praise--but one which is rather unique in its form. The direct "You" address of God throughout this song has

few parallels throughout the psalms. Its hymnic form (particularly with refrain) indicates it must have been used in some cultic setting, but the particularity of that setting is uncertain. The psalm is probably late--certainly later than Genesis 1 on which it depends. The refrain is sung by a group (congregation? choir?) as evidenced by addressing God as "OUR Lord," and the verse by a single singer (I see your heavens).

Comment: Verse 2, the bit about strength the mouth of children that destroys enemies, is unique to the entire Old Testament; nothing else is like it anywhere in the Biblical corpus. The commentary takes this as talking about Israel's enemies (destroyed by God's power even in the mouths of children), but this misses the "your" suffix on "rivals" in the first colon of the verse.

In verse 3, the singer doesn't linger over the grandeur of the heavens, but shifts immediately to the place of humans in the cosmic order, our apparent insignificance but God's lifting up of us. In the grand scheme of things, what are we that you should remember us? Well, we're the ones you made like gods, who have rulership over everything else in the earth. While this psalm praises God, it does so on account of where God has placed humankind.

A note about the final verse--which presents only the beginning of the refrain; this is likely because the body of the psalm focuses earthward; there's no need to turn back heavenward, as the second colon of the refrain did.

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

As for the rest, brothers [and sisters]: Rejoice, be complete, be comforted, be of one mind, be at peace--and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss; all the holy ones greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is with all of you.

Comment: Writing to a community in conflict, it may strike us as surprising that as he closes his letter, Paul tells them first to "Rejoice." (A form of *χαίρω*. The NRSV translates this as "farewell," and while the word could be used as a generic closure to a letter, we have two and a half full verses to go here. Rejoice is better.) And yet, what good advice! Begin by focusing on what is joyful.

καταρίζω. Be complete, be restored, mend your ways, put things in order. Restore your relationship with God and one another. Then, *παρακαλεω*. Be comforted--or exhorted. (This is the word from which we get the Holy Spirit's name of *paraclete*.) Hear what I, Paul, have said to you--and also what you have to say to one another. Learn from it and take comfort. Then "be of the same mind." Not perfect agreement, perhaps, but come together. And then, *ειρηνευω*, live in peace. What excellent advice, packed into a single verse, for living together and resolving conflict.

The final verse of this passage is, of course, why it shows up today. These powerful gifts of God--grace, love, fellowship--outline the whole of the salvation story. The way

they are written, giving each one to a person of the Trinity, is dangerous. It's Biblical, it's Pauline, it's featured in our liturgy weekly, and it's also modalism, an early Church heresy. Isn't it true that we experience the divine Parent's love, and understand our grace as coming primarily through the Christ event, and our binding together into one community of faith as the Spirit's work? And yet, isn't it also true that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in each of these gifts, and the way they are manifest in the lives of the faithful? How can we best proclaim this delightfully Lutheran paradox?

Matthew 28:16-20

But the eleven disciples went on to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus specified to them. And seeing him, they worshipped, but [some of them] they doubted. And Jesus, having come, spoke to them, saying, "All authority in heaven and on [the] earth has been given to me. So going out, disciple all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all the many things I commanded you. And look: I AM with you every day, until the consummation of the age.

Form: The form of this passage is an apothegm--a saying of Jesus (one of Matthew's common forms)--given with a full introduction. It contains three parts: A statement of authority, a commissioning, and a promise. The repeated word "all" holds this saying together. It is significant that Matthew, who is fond of relating narratives (with a great deal of his own editing), ends his Gospel not with a Matthean story but with Jesus' own words, a manifestation of Christ.

Connections: Matthew is good at evoking other passages when he writes, and this little passage at the end of the book is no exception. Locating this episode on a mountain, the disciples are commissioned in a way similar to Moses' commissioning; this sense is strengthened with Jesus' final sentence, "I am with you every day." Simply using *εἰμι* would suffice as the subject is imbedded in it; similarly, simply using *ἔγω* as the subject would make this a noun sentence which would be grammatically sufficient. Instead, Matthew says "*ἔγω μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι.*" The divine name, revealed to Moses on the mountain in Exodus 3, is split here by "with you," but including both parts of the phrase cannot be an accident.

Talk of worship and authority on a mountain also recalls the third of Jesus' temptations in Matthew 4. There, Jesus is promised (not authority but) the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshiping Satan. Here, Jesus has been given all authority, and rightly, he is the object of worship.

Finally, the word used for doubt in verse 17 is the same as that used for Peter's doubt as he walks on the water in Matthew 14:31. Interestingly, this passage is translated in most of the English versions as "they worshipped, but *some* doubted." The Greek has "*οἱ δε ἐδίστασαν.*" The *οἱ* could mean "some," but could also be just a substitute for the plural pronoun "they." It is just as likely, if not moreso, that while all worshipped, all had some measure of doubt. Which is good news for us, as we doubt!

Comment: The proclamation of the authority of Jesus is quite significant here. We of course read it in the context of the Good Friday/Easter story. But it's a new word, not part of the Easter narrative. In Easter resurrection, Jesus conquers death. But here the crucified one, the humiliated one, the one over whom the powers of this world have triumphed, has now been installed as ruler over the universe. It's a step that takes the Easter resurrection reversal and pushes it to that final step, where the Son of Man becomes the Lord of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Trinitarian formula for Baptism--in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit--is a sensible one for the early church. Certainly Baptism into Christ makes sense. But while the Jewish Christians found in Christ a continuance of their "previous" faith, for gentiles becoming Christians, this was also a new faith in the God of Abraham and Sarah. And as the charismatic gifts of the Spirit were so prevalent at Baptism in the early church, Her presence in the Baptismal formula is only logical.

We need to be *very careful* of focusing on the "Great Commission" in verse 19. "Only since the sixteenth century has Matt 28:19a become a decisive text for the mission of the church. Only since the beginning of the nineteenth century has the verse, especially in Protestantism, begun its victory march as 'the great commission.'" (Luz, 626) Since the Reformation came in the 1400's, the Great Commission isn't a Lutheran doctrine. Since the early Church saw Baptism as the major sacramental and ritual step among several other steps of Christian initiation (scrutinies, ethical development, exorcism, catechetical teaching, Baptism/Confirmation/Eucharist, mystagogy), the Great Commission isn't a foundational Christian doctrine. It's an invention of modern Christianity, and while in some ways it's a good one (reminding us "Shy Lutherans™" that evangelism is important), it needs to be kept to its place on the periphery of our faith.

So what do we do with the commissioning? We need to look at the beginning of the sentence. The disciples are not told just to Baptize--to go and convert the nations. They are told to *make disciples*. They are to go and develop people into followers of Jesus. The way this is done is through Baptism, but also through teaching to observe Jesus' commandments. Baptism does not fully accomplish discipleship. (We know this of course. But this passage might be a good reminder.) Discipleship has both an ecclesiological aspect--being part of the church--and an ethical aspect--behaving according to Christ's instruction. "The eleven disciples are not called to proclaim the 'gospel' or 'repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Luke 24:47). They are not to be 'witnesses of the resurrection' (Acts 1:22) or with Paul to proclaim the lordship of the *Kyrios* over the whole world. They are rather 'to teach what I have commanded you.'" (Luz, 633) This teaching is not catechesis before Baptism, but the living out of discipleship after Baptism.

Of course, the Gospel ends as it begins: With a proclamation of Immanuel, that God-is-with-us. This is perhaps the loudest theme throughout all of Matthew's Gospel, and is certainly the high point of this passage. Jesus' assertion of his authority and

commissioning of the disciples leads, ultimately, to the promise that He is with us always.

And so, any mission that the Church undertakes needs to be wide enough to embrace not only belief, but belonging and behavior. And it also needs to be characterized by two things. First, it must rely not on the power of humans or of the church structure, but only on the authority of Christ. And second, it must be characterized by the powerful, persistent love, not of Jesus ascended on high, but of Jesus who will not be separated from those he loves, not even at the consummation of all things.

Closing Comments

Our (right) desire to find language for God that is not androcentric leads to Trinitarian formulae such as “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” It’s language that fits well with our creeds. And yet, it’s also imprecise and modalistic. Despite the fact that we proclaim belief in “God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth,” Christians see in Genesis the presence of the Spirit and the Word of God in Creation. And so does the Nicene Creed, which says of Jesus, “through Him all things were made,” and calls the Spirit, “the giver of life.” The whole Trinity is Creator. We can see this in the conversion and discipleship experience described in Matthew today as well; Christ has authority, Christ commissions and commands, Christ is present--and yet, the experience of Baptism is one that turns toward the authority and commands of Yahweh, and that experiences the charisms of the paraclete. And while Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians might dole out parts of the salvation story to each person of the Trinity chronologically, he reminds us that the gifts of the whole Trinity are needed for a healthy life together in the community of faith.

And yet, in each passage, while we can find hints of Trinitarian ideas (not as fully developed, of course, as the Church would come to read them later), we have to notice that the descriptions *have* to tend toward modalism. Why? Because they all talk about what God does *for us*. We are created and placed in a special place in the order of creation, and rightly praise God for exalting our insignificance. And perhaps most of all for exalting us by exalting Christ, the crucified and humiliated, to resurrection and supreme authority. In Him we live together, only by God’s grace, love, and fellowship. We experience the Trinity by its gifts, and whatever the unfathomable mysteries of the immanent Trinity’s existence, we (personally and corporately) can find hope for our situations in our experience of the Trinity’s (personal and corporate) economy.

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This Sunday in the Latin Church is the feast of the Most Holy Trinity (the first Sunday after Pentecost in both the ordinary and extraordinary forms of the Roman Rite). With this post, I share some thoughts (assembled from homilies and jottings over the years) on this, the central mystery of Christian faith, the mystery of God's inner life. From 1759 until the introduction of the Missal of Paul VI in 1970, it has been specified that in the Roman Rite the eucharistic Preface should be that of the Holy Trinity on all Sundays of the year. (In practice, this was not always the case.) This hymn in praise of the mystery of God's essence dates from the early Middle Ages. The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, Year A. Gospel, First Reading & Psalm. Transcript. Study page. Leave a Comment. Related Bible study. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. That final greeting there, in that final greeting, we see a clear distinction between the three persons of the Holy Trinity—the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (so there's the second person, the Son), the love of God (which is a reference to the first person). For Paul, just as a side note, Paul does not often use the language of "the Father" in the way that Jesus does. So if you look at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about "the Father"—the heavenly Father, the Father, your Father, my Father—over and over and over again. Amjad Samuel Trinity Sunday Year A Sunday, June 19th, 2011 Let us pray: Help us experience you God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. AMEN. It is Trinity Sunday today. Trinity is hard to explain. It is hard though to be Christian and not engage with Trinity. In our understanding of the divine, it is this experience in faith that sets us Christians apart from all other approaches to religion. Islam for instance is adamant that there is only one God. In fact, there is a Surah in the Quran about it. I remember growing up I had to recite it before every Islamic Studies class period. This was a Roman Catholic school and the Islamic Studies teachers used it as a potent stab at the Christian faith. Trinity Sunday is the first Sunday after Pentecost in the Western Christian liturgical calendar, and the Sunday of Pentecost in Eastern Christianity. Trinity Sunday celebrates the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the three Persons of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Trinity Sunday is celebrated in all the Western liturgical churches: Latin Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and Methodist. Few understand how the Trinity doctrine came to be accepted - several centuries after the Bible was completed! Yet its roots go back much farther in history. Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 as much for political reasons—for unity in the empire—as religious ones. The primary issue at that time came to be known as the Arian controversy. "In the hope of securing for his throne the support of the growing body of Christians he had shown them considerable favor and it was to his interest to have the church vigorous and united." Debate shifts to the nature of the Holy Spirit. Disagreements soon centered around another issue, the nature of the Holy Spirit.