

BEGINNINGS

24 And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so.

²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

29 God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.

³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so.

31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:24-31, NRSV)

In the beginning, before clocks and calendars, in the beginning was God. And in the beginning God created. Moving from existence to action the Creator spoke all that is into being: Let there light, let there be land, let there be prairie and forest and flowers, let there be fish and fowl, let there be cattle and kangaroos. And then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” So God created humankind in God’s own image, in the image of God they were created, male and female. God saw everything and said it was very good, way back there in the beginning.

Our scripture lesson this morning came from the first of two creation accounts in Genesis. The first creation story begins with the famous verse, “In the beginning...,” and ends in the first few verses of chapter 2. The second creation story takes up from there, running for some 20 verses more. The first story describes God’s creative acts culminating in the creation of human beings. The second story focuses specifically on God’s creation of Adam and Eve in the idyllic Garden of Eden.

I’ve loved these ancient creation stories since I was a child. I liked imagining those 7 days when God spoke the stars and seas into being. I liked the part about Adam getting to name all the animals. And I can still conjure up that brazen artist’s rendition of Adam and Eve, with their strategically placed fig leaves. Even without the pictures, I continue to love these stories today. I don’t take them quite so literally, but I still take them to heart. I can do so because I recognize that while the Bible is full of religious and moral truth, it is not a science text. God could have created the world in 7 days or seven billion years. The

number is beside the point. The lesson of the story is that God was and is the Creator. That our world is not a random act, but a creative act brought into existence by a loving God.

This seemingly childlike story of God forming man and woman out of dust is more sophisticated than the English language conveys. The Hebrew word *adam* means humanity and *adamah* means the ground. So the writer of Genesis employs a pun to explain that humanity, *adam*, was created out of the *adamah*, the dust of the ground. Theologically, this points to the fact that while we're made in God's image, we are intrinsically connected to the earth. My seminary theology professor, Molly Marshall, liked to point out that both, "Dustiness and dignity are wrapped together in our humanity" (*What It Means To Be Human*, p. 23).

Is humanity still good? Or has our dustiness overcome our dignity? Is the creation of a world deemed good a long forgotten dream? I for one don't believe that a good world is beyond our grasp. Our world is ever evolving and we are ever creating. When we learn to live in cooperation with God we create a better world. As we journey together into the unknowns of a new year, we stand on the threshold of new possibilities. And these possibilities rest in our hands.

So where do we fit into the divine scheme of things? Genesis tells us not only that God created, but that humanity was created in the image and likeness of God. This is not humanity in an abstract or past tense. This is the personal story of every human being.

God was present at your creation and followed your progress through a multiplication of cells that resulted in another one of a kind human being. The psalmist wrote, "For it was [God] who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you that I am fearfully and wonderfully made..." (139:13-14). So wonderfully made that we bear the likeness of God.

Created in God's image—that sounds good but what does it mean? Theologians have debated this for centuries. One theory is humanity's God-given dominion over other creatures. Terence Fretheim, a professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, writes, "The image functions to mirror God to the world, ...to be an extension of God's own dominion" (*The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1*, p. 345). In other words, humans serve as God's designated representatives, ruling over nature on God's behalf.

Obviously we have not been benign rulers. As we begin 2003, the destruction of our environment surely ranks near the top of our greatest problems. Such abuse of nature arises from confusing our God-given dominion with domination (*Loving Neighbors Across Time*, p. 23). Those who seek to dominate the earth selfishly take from it, while those who seek dominion over the earth seek to work in harmony with nature to ensure life's sustainability. Robert Parham, a Baptist ethicist, says that taking care of our earth is a way of loving our neighbors across time. When we nurture our environment, we create a healthy planet for our great great grandchildren and other people we will never meet. Thus, we continue the creation story, a story that mirrors God's love and says that it is good. But our likeness of God carries more than ecological ramifications.

Our ability to think and reason reflects the image of God and, like our dominion over nature, can be used for good or evil. Will we work in cooperation with God to feed a hungry world? Or will we use our resources for our own luxurious living? Will we use our technology to deliver bandages or bombs to Third World countries? Will we elect officials who use their offices to help others or to help themselves? We have the ability to reason and choose. We have the ability to create a world that is good, a world that mirrors God's love.

Beside our intellect and reason, human creativity also reveals the image of God. Throughout both creation accounts in Genesis, God creates. As human beings we are called to be co-creators, to cooperate with God in the ongoing work of creation. Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner contrasts making and creating when he wrote, "To make suggests making something out of something else the way a carpenter makes wooden boxes out of wood. To create suggests making something out of nothing the way an artist makes paintings or poems. It is true that artists, like carpenters, have to use something else—paint, words—but the beauty or meaning they make is different from the material they make it out of. To create is to make something essentially new. When God created the Creation, he made something where before there had been nothing..." (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 20).

Perhaps that is one reason that great art, be it literature, music, dance, painting, or sculpture can refresh our hearts and souls. Most of us are not artists in the conventional sense, but that doesn't mean we're not creative. We have people in our church that craft beautiful handmade Christmas cards. Others use their creativity to arrange holiday flowers for our sanctuary or turn our halls into a circus for Vacation Bible School. Relationships require our creativity as well. Good ones don't just happen. There is an art to nurturing them. Two lives connect and suddenly there are more than two independent people, there are invisible bonds that touch us at our deepest level. British novelist and essayist G.K. Chesterton wrote that two is not twice one. Two is a thousand times one (Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace*, pp. 52-53). This is the creative magic of relationships. When we create loving relationships with our friends, our family, our fellow church members, and our neighbors, we are continuing the story of creation that was good.

Be it baking a signature cake for the Antiques Fair, creative problem solving on a church board, or figuring out how to teach 5th grade Sunday School in a fun and meaningful way, when we link our creativity to the helping of others we are co-creators with God.

Surely too, being created in the image of God refers to our unique spiritual relationship with God. We are creatures and God our Creator, yet the Psalmist wrote that God made humans a little lower than the angels. We have souls. We have the possibility to live in communion and relationship with God. We have the ability to make moral choices, to please or displease our Creator. God created us to live in relationship with one another and with God. And we alone can view our moments as holy and sacred. Yet this is not automatic. Deepening our relationship with God requires the same kind of intentional

energy as do our relationships with one another. While God created the relationship, we must cooperate and co-create.

As we prepare to begin a new year, perhaps it's time for some evaluation and resolutions. How can we use our God-given reason and creativity to improve our lives, our families, our church, our world? Where do we want to be in one year, five years, ten years? Not where do we think we'll be, but where do we dream to be? God's creative action in our church and our world has not ceased. Each of us has a role to play in our church and in our world. Whether we realize it or not we are creating every day of our lives. The question is what are we creating? Are we creating homes that nurture our children and our spouses? Are we creating a church that welcomes members as family and strives to make ours a more loving community? Are we creating a world where human need surpasses human greed and the poorest of the poor are cared for? I believe that we as a church family can do all of these things and more.

Here at the beginning of 2003, a year yet to be created, let us remember our Creator, God, who was there way back in the beginning and will be with us always. Let us recall that we are all created in the image of God. That every one of us has been given power and responsibility, intelligence and reason and creativity to fashion a wonderfully loving world. As we create let's remember that God dwells within and around us. Let us dream big about what our lives can be and what our church can become knowing that the God who was present in the beginning, will be present in all of our beginnings as well. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

God of the universe, out of love you created this world of wonders. By sending us your Son Jesus you blessed human history. You have given us the gift of time, past, present, and future. Guide us that we might wisely use this precious gift. May our New Year's celebrations stir our hope in you, helping us to face the future confidently, challenging us to use our gifts for the good of others.

We thank you for the blessings of life and for human progress over this last year. Give us the wisdom we need to use our knowledge and technology wisely in the coming year. And give us the love we need to embrace one another as one human family. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. AMEN.

Part of the prayer was adapted from *Celebrating the New Millennium*, by James E. Adams.

