

“Creation’s Song, Part One: Beginning”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for August 16th 2015 (12th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Genesis 1: 1,2
Psalm 33

It is fair to suggest...or so I believe...fair to suggest that the remarkable contours of the first chapter of Genesis, with its solemn recital of the seven days of creation, constitutes one of the most **familiar** parts of our scriptures, constitutes, as well, one of the most **profound** parts of our scriptures, but also...given the nature of its contents...constitutes one of the most **divisive**...

...you heard that correctly, one of the most divisive parts of our big book, and of the Judeo-Christian culture shaped by that big book.

In terms of its familiarity, there was certainly a time when any even moderately educated person, coming of age in the Christian West, would instantly have recognized and would likely have been able to locate the words, *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*. That the situation has changed in our contemporary context, that young people especially have grown distant from our culture’s Biblical roots, is a loss which most of us will mourn. What most certainly does remain true to this day, however, is that even the most New Testament oriented Christian—one who can take or leave the Old Testament—will be almost certain to include in their store-house of treasured Old Testament passages, the Bible’s first chapter: Genesis 1.

As for its profundity, the very fact that it comes at the start to what is, after all, a very big, sprawling Biblical epic: its location, in and of itself, hints at the esteem with which the Bible’s ancient compilers regarded this chapter. Keep in mind that It is now generally accepted by most mainstream Biblical scholars, that there are actually two Biblical accounts of creation: the more ancient being the charming, folk-tale-like story of Adam and Eve in the Garden, a ground-up view of creation, if you please. The other, placed significantly ahead of it, frames not only the other story but the entire Bible, namely this far more sophisticated, account of the seven days of creation: written in a far more elevated, far less folksy style, than the Garden of Eden story which follows. With its solemn cadences and its grand unfolding of God’s day-by-day design for the creation of the cosmos, Genesis 1 provides an unforgettable start to the Biblical witness. Familiar! Profound! Unforgettable! Alas: to these descriptors needs to be added one further term. Divisive! Undeniably divisive!

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Go no further...no further than the formation of our own denomination, the United Church of Canada, to get a sense of the role the first chapter of Genesis has played in creating some of the most notable fault lines within the world of contemporary Christianity. Many of you know that the United Church was born in 1925, as the result of successful conversations between Canadian Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists. What you may not realize is that these conversations had been going on for decades, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Canada began its westward expansion. Back then, and for many decades to come, Canadian Baptists played a significant role in these conversations. In time, however, the Baptists came to the conclusion that they represented a different branch of Protestantism: one that was not likely compatible with the denomination, united and uniting, beginning to emerge here in Canada.

While it is most certainly the case that there were many factors at play—including, of course, the basic issue of infant versus believer's baptism—these decades were the ones that saw the birth of what is sometimes described as two-party Protestantism: a distinction that has a great deal to do with the divided response Christian Churches were making to the theories of Charles Darwin. Those Christians who came to the conclusion that there was no incompatibility between Darwin's theories—no incompatibility between the theory of evolution—and the Biblical narrative, included the churches that came to form the United Church of Canada; those who came to the conclusion that their reading of Genesis 1 (and other Biblical creation texts) left them no choice but to oppose the theory of evolution, chose to remain outside of the union. And so there is a very real sense in which Genesis chapter 1, despite its gravity and its beauty, has provoked and continues to provoke a firestorm of debate both inside and outside the church, with a special emphasis on the relationship between science and religion.

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For what it's worth...and it may not be worth a whole lot...for what it's worth, I believe that there continues to be an urgent need for us to be able to distinguish between science...and what is sometimes referred to as scientism. When scientists—or science's acolytes—claim that Darwin...or Freud...or Newton...or Einstein...or Hawking...have somehow disproved what they might describe as the "God hypothesis", we as Christians have every right simply to say: "No. They haven't." To base theological conclusions on scientific findings is to misuse science. Let me say that loudly and clearly! However!

As a Christian, I have no choice but to acknowledge that our tradition—far too often—has been guilty of precisely the same wrong, though in an opposite direction. If theological conclusions—indeed, theological negations—cannot be derived from scientific findings, it is nevertheless the case that it may well be an even greater absurdity when Christians attempt to use their sacred texts in order

to refute the findings of science. Whatever else the first chapter of Genesis may provide, what it most certainly does not provide is a scientific roadmap to the creation of the universe. That's not its intention...and we badly misuse Genesis, when we attempt to put it to work for which it was never intended.

And you know! We often make the mistake of assuming that this is a recent problem...a problem that came upon us as the result of the need for Christians to respond to the theories of Charles Darwin. In actual fact, the challenge posed by those who attempt to turn the Bible into a science textbook is not a new one. Some 1400 years before the birth of Charles Darwin...way back in the 4th and 5th centuries, a brilliant man we have come to know as St. Augustine, expressed his exasperation with those who misuse scripture in this way. He's worth quoting at length; here's what he has to say.

“Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics, and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion.”

To repeat! That was written some 1600 years ago. The Bible then...no less than now...is not a science manual. Genesis chapter 1 then...no less than now...is not a science textbook! Let's be clear on that! But yes, let's also flip that particular coin and ask ourselves—especially at the start of what will hopefully be an 8 or 9 week exploration of the first chapter of Genesis: let's ask

ourselves, “if when we open our Bibles to its first chapter, if a science lesson is **not** what we’re after, why then do we open to our scripture’s momentous first chapter?” If not science, what then do we expect to find there?

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An affirmation of faith...faith in the Creator God. That’s what we expect to find there! To speak the words with which the first chapter of Genesis opens...

...in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth...

...to not only to speak those words but to claim them, in some basic and foundational sense as our own, is to claim for ourselves a truth that can neither be explained nor accounted for, neither proven nor disproven by even the most sophisticated of scientific apparatuses. To speak those words...to claim those words as our own...is to name God as the One who at the beginning of time launched this vast cosmos into being: a celebration of the One who is not merely “the” Creator, but “our” Creator. But there’s more!

That celebration—that celebration of the Creator God—is also a reminder of the unspeakable dignity God has thereby conferred on a created realm which, far from being a cosmic accident—far from serving as the ultimate cosmic joke—is a realm of value, dignity and worth. In the words of the United Church’s own creed, to claim the first chapter of Genesis as our own is to claim that we are indeed not alone, that we live in God’s world: a world that is God’s by virtue not only of the fact that God-in-Christ paid this world the honour of a house-call, but the no less basic fact that it is this very God who launched the world into being at the beginning of time.

And yes: I am reminded...reminded of the great German-American psychologist, Erik Erikson, whose greatest contribution to his field revolves around his theory of “psycho-social development”. That sounds a lot fancier than it actually is. In effect, Erikson argued that human beings, from the time they are born, must traverse a series of challenges through which they change and grow and take on their full stature. I find it noteworthy that his very first stage, the stage that a child must engage during its first two years of life, involves the tension between what Erikson termed “basic trust” and “basic mistrust”. In other words: will a child learn to adopt an attitude in which she is able to trust the people and things around her...or will she instead adopt an attitude in which she comes to basically mistrust those people and that world.

But you know: from the perspective of this 64 year old cynic, I wonder why...I wonder why any of us would be inclined to place our trust in anyone or anything. And yes, I realize lots of folks—present company included—can struggle with belief in, let alone trust in God. But leave God to the side! Why would anyone trust their own sense perceptions? Why would anyone presume

that the world in which they live is real? That the life they think themselves to be living is real? That this whole business we call living is not merely some elaborate dream...an elaborate hoax...or, worse still, some mad scientist's elaborate lab experiment run amok! And the frustrating...and wonderful truth is that we can't disprove any of those possibilities! Just as we take the reality of the Creator God on faith, we have no choice but to take our own created reality on faith. Our own reality...and our own dignity...as those whose beginning in God's gracious act of creation hints at the astonishing end for which God is readying us even here, even now.

Friends in Christ: at the end of the day...at the end of the day...to claim the ancient Creation faith as **our** faith is to do nothing more, but nothing less, than to stand in solidarity with those who have chosen to see their world and their lives as imbued with a God-given meaning, a dignity that can never be taken away. A meaning, a purpose, a dignity that need never be proven, because it cannot be proven. A meaning, a purpose, a dignity that must simply be assumed—in the beginning—and then re-claimed each day. New every morning! And yet grounded in a love more ancient than time itself.

May we never hesitate to place our trust in so rich and rare a love.
Through Christ! Amen.