

“Creation’s Song, Part III: Space”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for August 30th 2015 (Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Genesis 1: 6-8/Mark 4: 35-41

I have found myself over the past week pondering...pondering a hypothetical scenario: one that, sadly, is hardly far-fetched.

Imagine...imagine a community, such as High River in Alberta: a community in which an awful flood has left horrendous devastation. (Given yesterday’s storm, such talk will not seem odd, now will it?) At any rate, picture a family living in the flood zone, forced to evacuate. Mercifully, this particular family has relatives a couple of hours drive from High River, and so with considerable sadness and apprehension, they pack the trailer, head for the open road, and leave their beloved home: without any assurance as to when they’ll be able to return, or the condition they’ll find their home in upon their return.

Days pass. Finally they are given the green light to go home. Once again they pack and begin their trek: arriving at their property at dusk, when it is pretty much impossible for them to see clearly just what the damage has been. And so, under the cover of nightfall, they hunker down in their trailer and do their level best to get a good night’s sleep. Darkness falls...and dusk turns to night.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, they eagerly dress and leave the trailer to inspect their home. Alas: daylight reveals what the darkness had kept hidden from view. Their property and their beloved home are devastated by the flood. Oh yes; there is the possibility of reclaiming a few things, but for the most part, they will be starting from scratch. Their lives turned upside down; their world in turmoil; their home and cherished possessions almost unrecognizable. And yes: no doubt, for just an instant they found themselves wondering whether they might have been happier had the light of day not dawned: happier had they been unable to see the heart-breaking loss they had endured.

Well: my guess is that this hypothetical little scenario captures something of the mixed bag of reality confronting us at the start to the second day of creation. Then again: the second day is a Monday, and we ought not to be all that surprised that a Monday morning finds us out of sorts. But here’s the thing!

At the beginning of creation, at the start to the first day of creation, the world (if you can even call it a world) is little more than a ball of confusion, a churning glob of chaos. Remember that description from the Bible’s second verse: *the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*. If that sounds, to your ears, like a depiction of utter desolation, suffice it to say that your ears have

heard correctly! And yes, to be fair, God does get started with the work of creation on day one, through the momentous act of creating light! But if we are going to be honest about it, as things stand at the start to day two, the only thing that has changed is that God has flipped a switch so that we can now **see** the chaos, sort of like that flooded-out family that could only see the devastation when the light of day dawned. I'll concede, of course, that visible chaos is probably preferable to a chaos bound in the terror of utter darkness: but only by a small margin. There is still so much left to be done; so much more needs to happen if chaos is going to yield to cosmos. And yes: it is the work of the second day—Monday's work—through which the next step is taken.

And here, as was true on day one, the vital step involves a separation. The first day of creation separates light from dark, day from night. But now, no less dramatically, God plants what the King James Version famously describes as a "firmament", or—as our more modern translation describes it far more prosaically but perhaps less ambiguously, God places a dome in the midst of the chaos. Above that dome are the celestial waters, still churning, still dangerous, but at a safe remove. Below the dome are the terrestrial waters, the earthly waters, still churning, still dangerous, but now somewhat tamed, having been hewn off from the celestial waters. You see: at the end of the second day, the earth is still entirely covered by the swirling water: but a breach has been made, marking a boundary to their power and their sway. While it is most certainly true that a portion of the primeval water continues to cover the earth, this gigantic dome now divides earth's waters from heavens'. In a very real sense, the chaos has been put on notice: its power is not absolute, its sway is no longer undivided. In short, the work of creation can truly be said to have begun on this the second day. Chaos has not merely been illumined; chaos has now, in a very real sense, been cut in two, its power utterly and radically qualified by the Word of the Creator God. Hallelujah! Hallelujah and Amen!

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Let's begin...let's begin by noting the provisional nature of the work God accomplishes on day two. Yes: the power of the waters, the power of chaos, has been cut in half, and that is no small achievement. But let's not oversell the accomplishment, in light of the fact that the earth remains completely engulfed by the raging of the waters. Indeed! As day two draws to a close—and this is true of day two and only of day two—we are **not** told that God looks at what has been achieved that day in order to see that it is "good". Not because the work of day two is bad, but because the work is only half done! The job will not be complete until day three, when God brings out dry land from beneath the still churning terrestrial waters. That, however, is Tuesday's work: and while Monday's work...the work of separating the earthly from the heavenly waters is a necessary step, creation is still very much a work in progress. God's pronouncement of "good" will have to wait another day! But there's more.

Next, and perhaps more importantly for those who live in an age of science, let's acknowledge that we have come face to face, this morning, with what most of us will have no choice but to regard as a primitive way of thinking about the cosmos. It was one thing last week, as we pondered Sunday's work—the work of day one, the work of God's creation of light—it was one thing, last week, to derive a small measure of satisfaction from the way in which Genesis, thousands of years before Einstein, celebrated light as foundational to all of reality. But it would be foolish, indeed, to attempt a similar move this morning, as we consider Monday's work, the work of the second day of creation, the work of placing a firmament—a dome—between heaven and earth.

Let me spell it out for you!

What we witness here is a decidedly pre-Copernican view of the world, one that places the earth at the centre of the universe. According to this way of regarding things, the earth, in effect, lives inside a protective bubble, literally inside of a protective dome. On one side of the dome, the earth rests secure; on the other side of the dome, are the heavenly realms, including the celestial waters that could fatally undo the earth were God to withdraw the protective veil, the protecting dome. And so, later on in Genesis when we read of the flood, and of Noah's ark, we are receiving a small taste of what would happen were the dome and its protection to be withdrawn from us. And when, in one of the most glorious of the psalms, the poet exalts that "the heavens are telling the glory of God," adding that "the firmament proclaims God's handiwork", what we are hearing is an affirmation that the firmament—the dome—under which life, including human life can flourish, is to be numbered amongst God's greatest gifts. Make no mistake about it: that is the world-view on display this morning, a world-view so unlike the one science has commended to us, that it may leave our heads spinning. What in the world are we to make of any of it?

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Well: I suppose we can turn up our noses to insist that such an account has nothing whatsoever to say to us. Or maybe...just maybe...we can look more closely.

And perhaps we can do worse, in the process of looking again, than momentarily to shift our angle of vision so that we come at these questions from the perspective of that small story told of Jesus when, travelling across his hometown lake, he is called upon to still the raging of a storm. It's no secret that Mark's Gospel—from start to finish—presents Jesus as the One who comes to us bearing the unique authority of, Israel's God: the God who created heaven and earth. Through his healings, and through his exorcisms, the Jesus of Mark's Gospel is revealed as the One who has begun the work of **restoring** God's good creation. And in the stilling of the storm, it is nature itself that receives healing

from the hands of Christ. In effect, he tames the raging storm, much as the Creator began to tame the raging waters on creation's second.

And, you know: we can either look at the world-view that informs Mark's Gospel, a world-view which, when push comes to shove, is not all that terribly different from the world-view that informs the writers of Genesis...

...we can either look at that world-view, shake our heads sadly or perhaps even derisively, and walk away: or we can look again and remark at the ruthless honesty of a faith tradition that has the courage to say that life is excruciatingly dangerous, a faith tradition possessed of the courage to admit that disaster is often only a heart-beat away, the courage to acknowledge that the ordered cosmos, the ordered bubble in which most of us lead our daily lives, can be reduced to swirling chaos by the next phone call, the next doctor's appointment, the next headline, the next knock on the door. And while it may be true that the Ancient Israelites were no strangers to the desert—were no strangers to what life is like in the absence of water—they obviously understood water's destructive potential, and the extent to which water unleashed can provide a powerful metaphor for all the many things that can shatter our complacency and turn our worlds upside down.

Yes! It takes courage—and ruthless honesty—to acknowledge our comparative helplessness before all of the things that can upend our lives. And yes: it takes great faith to live each day with the assurance that it is God's intention **not** to permit the flood waters to have the final say in any of our lives: great faith to live each day with the conviction that in Jesus Christ, God has spoken a defining Word, a living Word that restlessly seeks to finish what God began in the beginning, a word that not only seeks but has promised to still the raging of all our storms.

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Permit me a final thought.

Some of you will have noticed that I have yet to make any use of the word that gives this reflection its one-word title. That word is "space." Space.

And you know: I'm enough of a Star Trek fan to have ringing in my ears those solemn words that introduce just about every episode: "Space: the final frontier". But, of course, in Genesis, it's really the opposite: "Space, the first frontier," because, in effect, that's what God creates on day two. In the act of separating the waters above from the waters below, God made space, made some room: room enough for life to be lived on this still flooded earth.

And forgive me if I indulge in a little bit of God talk—Trinity talk—even though this is most definitely not Trinity Sunday. You see: one of the great

strengths of the Trinitarian way of conceiving God, is that it invites us to ponder God as the One in whom there was already space: a rich love-drenched space, in which Father, Son and Spirit could conspire toward the creation of a world. Not content to delight in the **inner** dance of love that is God's own being, creation involves the decision to open up a space **outside** of God, external to God. Think of the risk involved in that decision! Think of the countless ways in which those to whom space was offered, could abuse that space. And then recognize that this is precisely the risk God was prepared to run from the beginning: with the decision to part the waters, to create room, to make space in which others could be given the space in which they too could be, in which they too could live: space enough and room enough in which they too could learn life's most precious lesson. Making room, making space, for one another! Under the protective firmament of God's wondrously sheltering, and endlessly patient love.

So God made the dome, and separated the waters that were under the dome, from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. And God called the dome sky. And there was evening, and there was morning, the second day.

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!