

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Celebrating Creation

And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good.

– Genesis 1:1-2:4a

One of the most mystical experiences of my life came in a biochemistry class in the Medical Sciences Building at the University of Alberta. The lecturer was describing the DNA molecule, the complex molecule which serves as the blueprint for all life on our planet. DNA is so tiny, it is invisible to the eye, yet if you took the DNA in one human cell and stretched it out, it would be several feet long, and since you have ten trillion cells in your body, the DNA in your body would stretch the 150 million kilometres to the sun and back more than 60 times! And that doesn't include the mitochondrial DNA or the DNA in the billions of microbes that inhabit us – nay, that are a part of us. The lecturer described in great detail the intricate structure of the DNA molecule, which makes it possible to store and pass on genetic information with great accuracy, generation to generation, and yet also to allow for random mutations, which make genetic diversity, adaptation and evolution possible. By the end of the lecture, I was in awe, speechless, struck dumb by the majesty and beauty of it. I remember just sitting for a few minutes, and then turning to one of my classmates with wide eyes. It was a mystical experience, in which I had a profound sense of the miracle that is life.



Figure 1 – DNA under Electron Microscope

DNA is only one of the intricacies involved in even the simplest forms of life. In addition to its genetic material, every cell has to have an enormously sophisticated membrane which serves as a boundary between the cell and the outside world, keeping out what the cell doesn't need or want, but allowing for nutrients to enter, and waste products to leave. It also has to have an amazing variety of proteins and enzymes which will transcribe and repair the DNA, provide energy for the cell, determine when the cell is ready to replicate and undergo replication, and a host of other duties. Every cell in your body, every cell in every organism – from the simplest algae to the most complex animal – is an absolute miracle.

From the cell you can go even smaller, to molecules and atoms and subatomic particles, and find new wonders at every stage, or you can go larger, to organs and organisms and ecosystems, to planetary systems, to planets and stars and solar systems and galaxies upon galaxies, and the more science you know, the more amazing you realize the world is. Did you know, for example, that astronomers estimate that there are 100 billion stars in our galaxy alone, and that there are probably 100 billion or more galaxies in the whole universe? If each star was represented by a grain of sand, then there are ten times more stars than there are grains of sand in all the world.

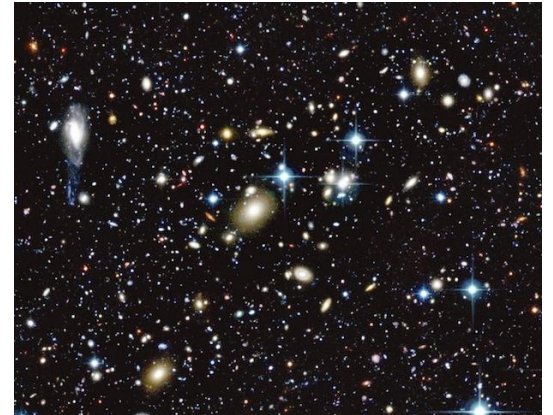


Figure 2 - Galaxies in deep space - picture from the Hubble telescope

As Paul Simon sings, “These are the days of miracle and wonder...”

- Everywhere you look, miracle and wonder.
- Everywhere you don't look, miracle and wonder.
- Everywhere you can't look, miracle and wonder.

But one of the most important things about a good education is that it teaches us how ignorant we are. For all that we know about the universe, there is much more that we don't know. For all that we know about medicine and physiology and cellular biology, there is so much more that we don't know. And for all that we don't know, there is still more that we don't know that we don't know. And what we don't know, we can't control.



This is a picture of Hurricane Irma from space just as it began to sweep through the islands of the eastern Caribbean. It is strangely beautiful picture, with its symmetrical spiral, its perfectly formed eye, its brilliant white. And yet beneath and behind that beauty is a terrifying reality: the second strongest hurricane ever recorded in the Atlantic, with sustained winds of

300 kilometres an hour, spinning off tornadoes, generating monstrous waves, ripping trees from the soil, demolishing buildings and tossing ships like a small child in a bathtub.

This is the other side of creation. Most of the time, the natural world is relatively reliable and predictable, but sometimes it is horrifyingly chaotic and destructive. Tectonic plates shift, volcanoes erupt, storms ravage, droughts create conditions for wildfires, random

mutations cause cancer or birth defects, infectious diseases devastate populations. This is the dark side of the created order.

It is no accident, therefore that the Bible begins with storm and chaos and darkness and deep. The story in the first chapter of Genesis is not an abstract statement, but a pastoral message addressed to a people in exile, to a people in chaos. Forgive me if I pause here to say again what needs to be said again and again in our culture, that there need be no conflict between a scientific account of how life came into being, and the deep spiritual meaning of these biblical creation stories. These stories are not primarily about what happened long ago. They are not explanations of how the world was made. They speak about God bringing order out of chaos and blessing all that lives. They speak to our sense of being invited into existence, the goodness of creation, and the place of human beings in that creation. They are not science, but gospel, good news addressed to a people who needed good news.

We know a fair bit about the people to whom this story was addressed because it was written during the Babylonian exile. When the Babylonian armies swept through Jerusalem in 587 BC, destroyed the temple, murdered thousands, put many of the rest in chains and transported them hundreds of miles to the northeast, it created the greatest crisis in Israelite history. Like the native experience in residential schools, the exile disrupted family life, undermined culture, community and language, and raised troubling questions about God's faithfulness. To the ancient mind, if your nation was defeated in battle then the victorious nation's gods had beaten your gods. So it was perhaps natural that Israelites wondered: had Marduk and the gods of Babylon defeated the Israelite God Yahweh? It was a chaotic time.

And to that experience of chaos and storm and darkness and deep, this story is addressed, and in that story a voice speaks: "Let there be light!" It is the powerful voice of God, stilling the chaos, ordering creation. God is no longer understood as a tribal god who had chosen Israel, but as the power behind all that is, the one who can call all creation into existence. The liberating God Israel had met in the Exodus is now revealed as the power behind creation. God's power does not demand, but invites. It is not oppressive power, but gracious power. It is an astonishing proclamation. To a people in chaos, torn by doubt and worry and disillusionment, the story speaks of a powerful, gracious word of God which can order chaos, bringing light out of darkness, solid ground under our feet, and astonishing variety out of oppressive conformity.

The story is not an explanation of the world; it is good news about a creative power at work in the world. In the midst of trouble and struggle, when life is unfair, when children are neglected and abused, when the good die young and the unjust prosper, when gentle breezes are less compelling than earthquakes and storms, the story assures us that God's creation is still good. The chaos is not yet completely overcome, and still does untold damage, but the power of love is at work.

And in the midst of this creation, the human has a special and unique role. The human is named as the image of God, in God's likeness, the one creature able to reflect God's gracious and self-giving love to the rest of creation. And that means that in the face of chaos, suffering and strife, we have enormous power and enormous responsibility. Humans can exploit tragedy, block compassion and bring further chaos, or we can bring light love and peace through our generosity and care. And that is why it is so healing, even as we hear about the destructive power of a hurricane or a wildfire, to also hear stories about the courage and compassion of people who reach out to help each other. Last June, after that crazy windstorm that knocked over so many trees and nearly ripped the front door off this building, a couple of people from the AA group held the door closed and called around until someone came to repair the hinges. Over the last couple of weeks, as rain and floods ravaged Texas and Florida, I watched videos of people risking their lives to help rescue those in trouble. This summer, as wildfires have ravaged British Columbia, it has been inspiring to see how well the various agencies of police and fire and forestry, municipal and provincial governments have worked together. Over the past few months, as the Fentanyl overdose crisis has taxed our health care system, it has been impressive to see how people have responded to care for the addicted and the vulnerable. There is perhaps no more horrible form of suffering than loneliness and pretty much any kind of struggle is much easier to bear when we know that we are not alone, that people care, that God cares.

There is a wonderful old rabbinic tale, about some students asking a rabbi when night ends and day begins. "Does it begin when there is enough light to see a human figure silhouetted against the sky?" one asks. The rabbi shakes his head. Another student asks, "Does night end and day begin when you can tell the colour of another's shirt?" The rabbi shakes his head. A third student asks, "Does night end and day begin when you can see well enough to recognize a person's face?" Again the rabbi shakes his head. The students give up, and the rabbi speaks: "Night has ended and the day has begun when you can look into your enemy's eyes and recognize your brother or sister."

And when that happens, when we look into a neighbour's eyes, even a stranger's eyes, even an enemy's eyes, with compassion, and see a brother or a sister, as the rabbi's story tells, then we know that God has created again, bringing peace out of chaos, light out of darkness, love out of apathy, life out of death. Let it be. Amen.

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 – a new paraphrase, by Ross Smillie

In the beginning
 the very beginning,
before life,
 before light,
 before time,
 before God created the heavens and the earth,
there was a void, an abyss,
 and over the deep was darkness,
all was formless and chaotic
 and a mighty wind from God
 stirred up the face of the waters.

Then God spoke,
 saying, “Let there be light!”
And there was light.
 And God enjoyed the light, for it was good.
So it was that light was separated from the darkness,
 And God called the light Day, and the darkness Night.
The Night, the Day, and the first day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
 Saying “Let there be sky!”
And so it was that the chaotic wind and waters were calmed
 And the waters separated, some above the sky and some below.
The Night, the Day, and the second day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
 Saying, “Let the waters below the sky gather together so that there may be
dry land!”
So it was, and God called the dry land Earth, and the gathered waters were called
Seas.

 And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.
Then God spoke,

Saying, "Let plants and trees grow from the earth,
and let them bring forth seeds and fruits."

So it was, and the earth brought forth vegetation,
plants bearing seeds of every kind
and trees bearing fruits of every kind.

And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.
The Night, the Day, and the third day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
Saying, "Let there be lights in the sky to separate the day from the night,
To give light and to mark times and seasons and days and years.

And so it was.
God made the two great lights
The greater light to rule the day
and the lesser light to rule the night.

And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.
The Night, the Day, and the fourth day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
Saying, "let the waters teem with creatures, and let the sky be filled with
birds!"

And so it was.
God made every living thing that moves, of every kind, in great variety,
From the great whales of the sea to the smallest hummingbird.

And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.
God blessed them, saying "Be fruitful and multiply:
Creatures of the waters, fill the lakes and rivers and seas;
Creatures of the air, fill the skies!"

The Night, the Day, and the fifth day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
Saying, "Let the earth be filled with creatures:
Insects and animals and other creatures of every kind."

And so it was.

God made every kind of wild animal, and cattle and other beasts suitable for livestock,

And every kind of creature that creeps on the ground.
And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.

Then God spoke,

Saying, "Let us make humans to reflect our image,
Able to live in our likeness,

So that they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air,
The cattle, the wild animals and every creeping thing on the earth.

God created human beings to reflect God's image

Male and female God created them.

And God blessed them, saying "Be fruitful and multiply,
Fill the earth and till the soil.

Be responsible for the fish in the sea and the birds in the air
and every living thing that moves on the earth.

I have put into your hands
every plant that produces seed
and every tree that bears fruit
to be your food.

To all animals and birds, everything that moves and breathes,

I give whatever grows out of the ground for food.

And it was so.

God cherished everything that had been made, for indeed it was very good.
The Night, the Day, and the sixth day came to an end.

And that is how the heavens and the earth were made,
Along with all their inhabitants.

And on the seventh day God finished the work,
By resting.

And so God blessed the seventh day and made it a Holy Day,
Because on that day God finished the work by resting.