

The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for May 31, 2026 Genesis 1:1-2:4a - "God is Not Binary"

I come to you in the name of Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

While some places have already started their celebrations, June is officially Pride Month. Pride started as a protest movement, born in the Stonewall riots of 1969. These riots were a series of violent confrontations that began in the early hours of June 28, 1969, between police and gay rights activists outside the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in the Greenwich Village section of New York City. As the riots progressed, an international gay rights movement was born.

This season has, historically, been a time of advocacy and protest for basic human rights to be shared with sexual and gender minorities. And I would love to say that things have gotten better but considering things like the anti-2SLGBTQIA+ laws continuing in the US and around the world (especially anti-trans laws), the high rate of murders against the community, and the heightened debate around the rights of transgender people, this unfortunately is a topic that needs to remain in the forefront.

It feels appropriate that the reading for today, as we kick off Pride Month, is the first chapter of Genesis, one of the stories of creation, a story frequently used against queer people to say that we shouldn't exist, both from a sexuality perspective and also from a gender perspective. This creation story is a story filled with apparent binaries.

A lot can be said in celebration of the binary. It's an ancient system of organization, dividing reality into complementary or contradictory halves. Binary thinking is said to be a trait of Enlightenment thinking as modernity desired to classify and categorize, and with that to control. Binaries give easy handles. Pairs. Opposites. They're definitive, comprehensive, and universal.

Binaries come in handy when trying to explain and teach. Think true/false tests and yes/no answers. Male-female. Right-wrong. Conservative-liberal. First world-third world. Capitalist-socialist. Civilized-uncivilized. White-black. Rational-irrational. Human-beast. Spiritual-material. Friend-enemy. Clean-unclean. Either-or. Good-bad.

Arranging reality in black-and-white terms can make it as interconnected as swirls of yin and yang or as conflicted as two armies squared off on a battlefield. Dualisms are appealing but often fail to tell the whole story. The story from Genesis and all the binaries found within is a perfect example of this.

"God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." (1:5) Light and dark, day and night. These are two distinct and opposite binaries. But is there only light and dark, day and night? What about gray, dusk, and dawn?

"And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'... God called the dome Sky... Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.'... God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas." (1:6, 8, 9, 10) People used to believe that the sky was heaven and the only way to get there was to die.

History has given us airplanes to the sky and shuttles to space creating all the in-between spaces of the atmosphere. As for land and sea, who doesn't like a good beach? If there were strictly land and sea, there would be no beaches, nor would there be swamps.

“And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’... 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.’” (1:20, 24) Here come the fish, birds, insects, creepy crawlies, and every type of animal and creature you can imagine. According to the binary system, fish will swim and birds will fly. What about the fish that fly and the birds that swim? Insects that both crawl on the ground and fly in the air? Not so clear cut, is it?

Finally, after light and dark, after sky, sea, and land, after fish and birds, after insects and animals, God creates human beings. Here is the damning verse, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (1:27) When Christians think about gender, they return to this verse. If you grew up hearing these stories and living with people who seemed to fit inside these gender boxes, the existence of transgender people might seem to fly in the face of God's created order. However, when we look just a little closer at each of the passages in the creation story, we find a much more complex and beautiful world. When God finally gets around to creating people, it's after creating all of those other opposites. Humans, then, are also created in an opposite pair – male and female.

The text might set up these binaries, but God's creation exists in spectrums. No one would argue that a penguin is an abomination for not fitting the categories of Genesis 1, or that a beach isn't pleasing to God because it's neither land nor sea. In the same way, God gives every human a self that is unique and may not always fit neatly into a box or binary.

I believe that many people understand Genesis 1 to be a story, a metaphor of how the world came into being, not a scientific paper. I think there has been enough scientific proof that the world was created over the millennia, not a week. But many Christians get stuck on the binaries listed within the text, especially with regards to gender. We don't have to argue that dark and light mean only dark and light, or male and female mean only male and female. But they can also encompass all that falls between what is named.

Rather than writing Genesis 1 off as fiction that doesn't match reality, affirming Christians recognize that the stories set down in this chapter were never meant to catalogue all of creation, but rather to point us towards God's power and love. Not every microbe and constellation must be named in this chapter in order to have a purpose and a blessing. God's creatures are all wondrous, strange, delightful, and surprising. All are necessary to the fullness of creation, from amoebas and spiders to buffalo and orangutans.

The story of creation lists many binaries, but does that mean God didn't create everything in between? It's as if God got bored creating binaries after a few days and began to have some fun. Despite the push to honour God's binary creation, perhaps blurring that binary was always part of the plan. Days and nights enjoy fuzzy transitional moments we call dawn and dusk. Swamps are neither dry land nor lakes, necessitating the curious term wetland. The Genesis writer takes pains to describe the uniqueness of human beings who bear the divine image and they represent perhaps the greatest binary: not maleness and femaleness but rather the division between a species bearing God's likeness and all the rest. As

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, once said, “Each of us is made in the image of God. That’s why we have the chance to encounter Christ in every person we meet – especially those on the margins.”

Binary pairs are useful for simplifying large amounts of information we are required to process. But binaries are limiting and inadequate. If binaries are part of a grand project to categorize and explain, and probably also control and restrict, it is amazing how small and limited to our time and circumstances many of our most cherished binaries actually are, especially when it comes to gender.

After hearing all of this, I hope we will recognize our responsibility to challenge traditional understandings of gender because of the danger they pose to some of God’s children. I want us to acknowledge our responsibility to rework our theology to remove the binary as a show of support and advocacy for transgender people. And I want you to know that your role in this is to accept all people as members of the family of God, and thus your siblings in Christ. You never know whose life you may save. Amen.