

## God and Creation

Genesis 1:1- 2:4a

May 18, 2008

Perhaps some of you have heard what has been coined a feminist perspective on the creation story: “One day in the Garden of Eden, Eve called out to God, ‘Lord, I have a problem!’

‘What’s the problem, Eve?’ God asked.

‘Lord, I know you’ve created me and have provided this beautiful garden and all of these wonderful animals, but I’m just not happy.’

‘Why is that, Eve?’ God asked.

‘Lord, I am lonely. And I’m sick to death of apples.’

‘Well, Eve, in that case I have a solution. I shall create a man for you.’

‘What’s a man, Lord?’ Eve asked.

‘This man will be a flawed creature,’ said the Lord, ‘with aggressive tendencies, an enormous ego and an inability to empathize or listen to you properly. All in all he’ll give you a difficult time. But he will give you some good times, too.’

‘Sounds great,’ said Eve, with some hesitation.

‘Yeah, well,’ said God, ‘you can have him on one condition.’

‘What’s that, Lord?’ Eve asked.

‘You’ll have to let him believe that I made him first.’”<sup>1</sup>

“In the beginning God created...” Let me begin by stating my bias right up front. The authors of Genesis were not writing a book of science. They were not writing a book of history. Their primary questions were not “How was it done?” Or, not even, “When was it done?” But rather, “Who dun it?” and “Why?” The questions and their answers are of a religious nature, faith statements, and not scientific ones. One of the things that really gets me about some of the modern day attempts by some of our brothers and sisters in Christ is their trying to interpret the ancient stories of the Jewish faith literally when the people who came up with them never considered them to be literal.

The nomadic tribes of Israel were storytellers long before they were writers. And they were good at it. And they were good because they spent their evenings around the campfire telling and retelling the stories and because their stories had a purpose. That purpose was to answer the riddles of life. “Why do we have dominion over the animals?” “What is the nature and cause of evil?” “Why do we have to die?” “What is the meaning of life?” “Why do we exist?” “How did it all happen?” “When did it happen?” “Who was responsible for our existence and the existence of the rest of creation?” And they came to the faith statement that it all began with

this power – this source that brought everything else into existence. And they named this power “Yahweh” – God.

Now the stories the Israelites shared around those campfires were not necessarily “Israelite originals.” There were many creation stories. And every time a new one was heard it too was shared and reflected upon until the last embers of the fire died out ending the conversation at least for that night. They weren’t trying to describe historical events, but rather they were developing a faith – some religious truths in story form on which they could order the rest of their lives.

Almost every ancient civilization tried to develop stories about their take on how the world got started. One of the Chinese versions talks about a time when a great dragon rolled itself up into a ball thus forming the earth. This ancient story refers to the dragon’s bumps as mountains and its perspiration it understood to be the rivers of the earth. Trees were understood to be the dragon’s hair and lice were people. The Chinese believed this story to be so true that they refused to drill for oil or mine for coal. They feared that if they dug into the dragon’s skin in that way the dragon would wake up and thus destroy the world.<sup>2</sup>

The religious truth the Genesis writers have gleaned from their varied collection of creation stories is simply “In the beginning God created...” God was present from the beginning. God brings form and light, goodness and humanity into existence. “How?” That’s a scientific question – important, yes, and what we’ve learned through science has made a difference in our way of life ... but it’s not the central point when it comes to answering the significant riddles of our living from a religious perspective - nor are the two perspectives in conflict. The point of religious storytelling is not necessarily to be historical but rather to reveal the faith. God is the creator of the universe - the Lord of history, the establisher of justice and mercy. God is the creator of our beginnings.

“Some Hebrew scholars are convinced that (the opening phrase) should be translated, ‘When God began to create,’<sup>3</sup> and I really like that way of thinking about God as Creator – as the source of creation continuing to unfold – the beginning and still that creating energy.

Want to be proud of your United Methodist denomination for once? Tired of only hearing us criticized for our controversies? A little known action taken at the just completed 2008 General Conference bears repeating this morning.

The section on God’s Creation and the Church reads: “As disciples of Christ, we are called to be good stewards of God’s creation. Accordingly, we call upon The United Methodist Church to adopt fresh ways to respond to the perils that now threaten the integrity of God’s creation and the future of God’s children. Specifically, The United Methodist Church: (and then among a litany of things) endorses The Clergy Letter Project and its reconciliatory programs between religion and science, and urges United Methodist clergy participation.”<sup>4</sup>

Two other resolutions were also added to the Book of Resolutions and these read thus: “We find that science’s description of cosmological, geological, and biological evolution are not in conflict with theology.”<sup>5</sup> and “Therefore be it resolved that the General Conference of the United Methodist Church go on record as opposing the introduction of any faith-based theories such as Creationism or Intelligent Design into the science curriculum of our public schools.”<sup>6</sup>

What's The Clergy Letter Project you ask? Well, thanks for asking. I signed it almost three years ago. It came to me via the email as An Open Letter Concerning Religion and Science and reads like this:

“Within the community of Christian believers there are areas of dispute and disagreement, including the proper way to interpret Holy Scripture. While virtually all Christians take the Bible seriously and hold it to be authoritative in matters of faith and practice, the overwhelming majority do not read the Bible literally, as they would a science textbook. Many of the beloved stories found in the Bible – the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark – convey timeless truths about God, human beings, and the proper relationship between Creator and creation expressed in the only form capable of transmitting these truths from generation to generation. Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts.

“We the undersigned, Christian clergy from many different traditions, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as ‘one theory among others’ is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God’s good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator. To argue that God’s loving plan of salvation for humanity precludes the full employment of the God-given faculty of reason is to attempt to limit God, an act of hubris. We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth.”<sup>7</sup>

God is the creative source of this world we know. That’s a faith statement. Just how it happened is the work of science and we don’t believe science and religion need to be at odds with one another.

Today is Trinity Sunday according to the calendar of the church. It’s been celebrated in the life of the church since about the 10<sup>th</sup> century. We celebrate today probably the most important concept of our faith – the one that causes members of other monotheistic faiths to roll their eyes when they think about us. It seemed like an appropriate Sunday to kickoff a sermon series I’ve been considering for a number of years. Almost every time we do a study or bring in a speaker on another religion someone comments that they sure wished they knew what they believed as a Christian like people of other faiths seem to. And every time I heard that comment my resolve got a little stronger. Finally, I told Jeff a few months ago that this was going to be the emphases – the theme – for this summer’s worship services.

And, I have to admit to you a little uneasiness about this venture. I mean, courses are offered in seminary on these topics that we are going to highlight for 15 minutes or less each week. How presumptuous can one be to think it can be done? But, we’re going to take a stab at it.

The United Methodist Church came into existence in 1968. Before that we were The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church and there were a couple of other mergers along the way that birthed those denominations – including the union of the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren Church. We merged because there was much in our history that suggested we could get along. The 2004 edition of The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church includes this paragraph: “Theological traditions steeped in the Protestant Reformation and Wesleyanism, similar ecclesiastical structures, and relationships that dated back

almost two hundred years facilitated the union. In the Evangelical United Brethren heritage, for example, Philip William Otterbein, the principal founder of the United Brethren in Christ, assisted in the ordination of Francis Asbury to the superintendency of American Methodist work. Jacob Albright, through whose religious experience and leadership the Evangelical Association was begun, was nurtured in a Methodist class meeting following his conversion.”<sup>8</sup>

There’s a section in The Book of Discipline entitled “Our Doctrinal Heritage.” In that portion of this book which orders our life as United Methodists there are these observations: “United Methodists profess the historic Christian faith in God.”<sup>9</sup> “United Methodists share a common heritage with Christians of every age and nation.”<sup>10</sup> “With Christians of other communions we confess belief in the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This confession embraces the biblical witness to God’s activity in creation, encompasses God’s gracious self-involvement in the dramas of history, and anticipates the consummation of God’s reign.”<sup>11</sup>

And then there follows the unique way each denomination had stated the key tenets of the faith. We’ll try to share these significant statements each week as it seems helpful. Article I in the The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church is titled *Of Faith in the Holy Trinity*. The Article reads: “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”<sup>12</sup>

Article I in The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church is titled *God* and reads thus: “We believe in the one true, holy and living God, Eternal Spirit, who is Creator, Sovereign and Preserver of all things visible and invisible. He is infinite in power, wisdom, justice, goodness and love, and rules with gracious regard for the well-being and salvation of men, to the glory of his name. We believe the one God reveals himself as the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct but inseparable, eternally one in essence and power.”<sup>13</sup>

“Christians (then), are those who believe we haven’t really said ‘God’ until we’ve said “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>14</sup> John Wesley said in his sermon on the Trinity – “these three are one.” They are inseparable – they are of the same essence – an understanding of each is present no matter which aspect we are thinking about or referencing.

Tertullian, a theologian and teacher of the early church, once used a metaphor from the created world to clarify the meaning of the Trinity. He described God the Father as “a deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, and the Spirit as the blossom that spreads beauty and fragrance in the world.”<sup>15</sup>

Now, there’s no question that the doctrine of the Trinity is a hard one – it’s a challenging one. The same might be said regarding the Trinity as what Garrison Keillor once observed about love: “We should not think that we have figured this out, because it is not a problem, it’s a mystery and always will be.”<sup>16</sup>

Martin Luther once said: “To try to deny the Trinity endangers your salvation, to try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity.”

And so, what does this all say to us about what we believe about God? Primarily that we understand God to be the source of creation – the power which brings order out of chaos – a power we have an intimate relationship with – a power that is personal – and a power that is still with us – a triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit –

power, person, and presence – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – three revelations of the same being – the power that created us is the same power that is still with us.

We also understand that this personal and present power is not a male or female, does not look like us – remember the phrase used in the Methodist Article of Faith? - without body or parts. We believe God is Sovereign – that God is infinite in power, wisdom, justice, goodness, and love. We believe we can converse with God. We believe God is accessible – desires the best for us – is the initiator of a relationship – promises to love us – offers us grace and forgiveness. We believe that God began to create at the beginning of time and is still at it – in the world and in our lives.

Let us pray.

1. King Duncan, “Please, I’d Rather Do it Myself,” Collected Sermons: Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
2. W. W. Sloan, A Survey of the Old Testament (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 32.
3. Ibid., p. 33.
4. <http://calms.umc.org/2008/Text.aspx?mode=Petition&Number=990>.
5. <http://calms.umc.org/2008/Text.aspx?mode=Petition&Number=50>.
6. <http://calms.umc.org/2008/Text.aspx?mode=Petition&Number=839>.
7. [www.evolutionsunday.org](http://www.evolutionsunday.org).
8. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), p. 9.
9. Ibid., p. 41.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 43.
12. Ibid., p. 59.
13. Ibid., p. 66.
14. William H. Willimon, “Related to a God Named Trinity,” Pulpit Resource, April – June, 2008, p. 30.
15. As quoted in The Clergy Journal, May/June, 2007, p. 116.
16. James C. Leach, “Naming God,” Pulpit Digest, January/February, 1991, p. 55.