

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland
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Craig Janzen Neufeld

The day that children return to school feels like a new beginning. There are ‘back-to-school’ haircuts, new ‘back-to-school’ outfits, new backpacks, new lunch bags, and new school supplies. Even the air has that ‘new’ smell to it. I know this from being a student. I remember the newness that September felt like. It felt like the beginning of something new and fresh, and looking back, I’m amazed at how quickly that newness faded away. September is a time of beginnings. It’s a new year in some respects.

The fall, informally, marks the beginning of a new year in the church, and while the church has a calendar, where its new year begins on 1st Advent, November 30th this year, it’s September that marks the beginning of things here. Whether it be programming, like Jr. Church, gatherings, like today’s potluck lunch, or even worship series. Today is the start of a new year.

For the next few months we’re going to be using a resource called the “Narrative Lectionary” it’s a new-ish resource developed alongside the typical lectionary, as a way of walking through the biblical story over the course of a 4 years. And it’s only fitting, or maybe at this point it’s clichéd that we start at the beginning of God’s Story with humankind, in the Creation story of Genesis.

For those of us who have grown up in the church, we’ve heard this story over and over and over. Save for missing or possibly mixing up a few details we could probably tell this story by wrote. We’ve heard this story before, with different emphasis. We’ve heard it used to support the church’s call to care for creation. We’ve heard it used to defend humanity’s position over creation. We’ve heard it used to describe humanity’s separation from God. We’ve heard it used in so many of ways, it seems like maybe we don’t need a fresh new way to look at the creation story. Maybe we need to hear it again as a story of creation, noticing how it stands out as a the start of humanity’s story, or to put it another way, humanity’s origin story.

And we like to tell the story of new beginnings. We like to tell stories of where we come from. We like to know how we came to be.

In contrast to reading Genesis as a strict timeline, I've always imagined the Genesis creation story as a story told in the oral tradition. I want to invite you to use your imagination with me for a moment.

It's nighttime, in the wilderness, you and the other Israelites have been wandering. It's been at least a decade since you left Egypt. You've been wandering long enough to know how it works, in the morning you gather enough manna for the day, and in the evening, you settle in, as a column of fire burns on the horizon. Each family gathers around the campfire, and this night is no different. The children are winding down, and as you sit around the fire you feel a tug on your sleeve. One of the children looks at you and asks you the question, where did we come from. And rather than telling them how they left Egypt, rather than telling them of the day they were born, you tell them the story that was told to you by your parents, that was told to them by their parents, and by their parents and so on. As you gaze up at the stars, the sparks from the fire rise, and you begin....In the beginning....

This is the setting to which I like to imagine the story of creation being told. Sitting around a fire in the evening, and having an old wisened one tell the story. A story that had been passed down from person to person.

Humankind has tried to tell its origin story throughout history. And it often reflects the limits of humanity's knowledge at the time. If we were to tell the story of humanity's origin today, we would probably source contemporary scientific theories, theories such as the Big Bang theory, for the origin of the cosmos, and the Theory of Evolution for how humanity emerged. We might say, In the beginning there was nothing until...boom! The universe exploded into being. But it was a different story, for the Israelites.

At the time of its telling, the Hebrew story of creation was one of many. The Greeks tell the story of how, out of Chaos, Gaia and Tartarus and other forces emerge which give birth to Titans, who are overthrown (violently) by Gods. The Gods then create humanity, who live at their whim.

The Babylonians tell the story of how, in the beginning there was only the primordial waters, fresh and salt, and from these waters came the gods. From which a cosmic battle ensues, and from the blood of the defeated God Tiamat, humans are fashioned to serve the gods.

And the Egyptians, their story also begins in chaotic primordial waters, from which came Atum, who created air and other gods. Humanity is brought forth from Atum's tears, and their role was also to serve the Gods.

The Hebrew story, both draws on elements from their surrounding culture, and it also adds their own distinctiveness.

Our story, in the beginning, is similar to the other surrounding creation stories, there is chaos, represented by the deep sea, a primordial sea, waters of which there was no beginning and no end. And here is where we begin to differ. Over this deep sea God's wind, God's presence, God's spirit, moved. God was present at the beginning of all things. It's important to note that the Genesis story isn't a story about God's origin rather it's about humanities. And at the beginning was God, God's presence, and God's *voice*.

This is where the Hebrew story diverges. In all the other creation stories contemporary to the Hebrew one, there is more than one deity, all those traditions are polytheistic, that is they worship & follow many gods. The Hebrew story, alternatively, is monotheistic. There God. One. The 'I am' who is at the beginning, who speaks creation into being.

This is another divergence. For the Babylonian and the Greek story, creation and humanity come about from a conflict between competing deities. In the Babylonian story humanity comes from the slaughtering of another God.

The Hebrew story is different in that God is commanding, speaking, taking control of the chaos and giving it order by words alone. God speaks, let there be light, let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, let the waters under the sky come together, let dry land appear, let earth grow plant life, let there be lights in the dome to mark any and night, let there be seasons, let there be life in the waters, let there be life in the sky, let there be life on the ground, let there be humanity."

God creates in the Hebrew story, not by accident, but rather, because God wants to. God's creation occurs because God speaks it into existence. And, God creates without violence. There is no revolution, there is no competition God creates from a desire to create.

However, as the creation story continues the Hebrew story sets itself further apart from its contemporaries.

Where the contemporary story places humanity at best subject to the whim of their dieties and at worst in servitude to them, the Hebrew story is different. God creates humankind first in God's image, as an emulation of the goodness of the creator. Humanity is made in the divine image, filled with God's breath and God, their creator, isn't jealous of this, rather it's God's idea. God wants humankind to be like them. Rather than making humankind subjects or servants, God, instead, grants humankind the honor of being like their creator, and as such we have responsibilities.

Our role is not to serve but to instead be caretakers. The Common English Bible used a different verb than we're used to, in that it talks about humankind taking charge. This might be a bit of an old notion but to be in charge of someone is not to have power over them, but rather to be responsible for them. Humankind is to be in charge of God's creation, means that we are to be responsible for God's creation. This is a drastic difference from the surrounding creation stories of the time. Humankind is given a great responsibility rather than being reduced to pawns or slaves.

The Hebrew story, then finishes with God, YHWH, resting, looking back on all that was created, and calling it good, tov, a good that only God can be or declare.

This story of creation, in this particular way, sets the stage for God's relationship with humankind. Unlike the other dieties in the other traditions, God want's to be in relationship with God's created. In Genesis 2, we have an account of God wandering through creation in search of humankind, God sends prophets to draw humankind's attention back to God, we have Jesus, who is, Emmanuel, God-with-us, being present to humankind, to draw us back to God. From the very beginning, humankind holds a special place in God's heart. God's creation speaks to God's particular and intimate relationship with God's created, humankind, placing us 'just a little lower than the angels' and made in God's 'own image.' It shows God's particular affinity for humankind.

The Hebrew creation story is our creation story. For me there are a few important elements of this creation story that I hold onto as true and trustworthy. The first being, God created. The 'how' of it all doesn't matter to me, whether it was 7 days or longer, that doesn't make a difference to me, what's important is that God created. And that God did so with words, not violence.

The second is that God created because God wanted to. Humankind was created on purpose, and God holds a particular affinity for humankind. God wants to be in relationship with God's creation. This creation was one done out of love. It was a peaceful creation.

Third, humankind is created with responsibilities. We were not created to be slaves to a distant God, we were not made to be servants, rather we have been given a royal responsibility to be in charge of creation, in a way that we care for it, not have power over it.

Fourth, God's creation is good. God delights their creation. This is something that God takes pleasure in, it is something that pleases God. There is no feelings of malice, creation serves no other purpose than to be created and to be good.

We start our fall, our new year, telling the story of creation at the beginning, because it sets the stage for the larger drama of God's story and our story. That regardless of where the story goes from here, we know that God created. God created peacefully, and by speaking creation into being. God created because God intended to. God wants to be in relationship with creation. And so, when God created humankind, God gave humankind responsibilities. And finally God's creation is good, and to be delighted in.

This story forms the foundation for all the stories to follow. And it provides us a vision of what God intends for God's creation. It gives us a picture of God's dream.

Amen