

Sermon, June 7, 2020

Trinity Sunday

Good morning! Welcome again to Stay at Home Worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today Sean and Debi Beachy will join us to provide Special Music. Your Church Council continues to pay attention to the news and federal, state and local government guidelines to see when we can return to in-person worship, and what that should look like. I'll keep you posted. And now my weekly stupid joke:

I am constantly getting sales calls at home and now that I am home more, they are really getting on my nerves. I'm on the, "Do not call list," but they keep calling anyway. A guy called Friday, saying, "May I speak with Charles Robinson?" And I said, "Just tell me what you are selling" and he said, "Caskets," And I said "caskets?- Well that's about the last thing I'd ever need." After I hung up I called Verizon and said, "I'd like to report a nuisance telephone call" and they said, "What— YOU AGAIN?"

MUSIC

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

Almighty Creator and ever-living God, we worship your glory, eternal Three-In-One, and we praise your power, majestic One-In-Three. Keep us steadfast in this faith, defend us in all adversity, and bring us at last into your presence, where you live in endless joy, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from the first two chapters of Genesis.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 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.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 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. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights--the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night--and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth,

to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.

And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. 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."

So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."

And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. 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." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.

And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twenty-eighth chapter.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

My sermon is a little shorter than usual this morning, because the readings are so much longer than usual. But both readings are very important to our faith understanding, even though they are not without controversy.

Today is the first Sunday after Pentecost and thanks to Pope John the twenty-second, the Catholic Church has been celebrating today as Holy Trinity Sunday since the Fourteenth Century. Most Lutherans do too.

In fact Lutheran composer Johann Sebastian Bach wrote three different Cantatas just for this day. Still Trinity Sunday is an odd observance when you think about it, because this is the only Sunday we devote to a teaching of the Church rather than a teaching of the Bible.

Sure, there is plenty of Biblical evidence for a Trinitarian God, but there is no doctrine of the Trinity spelled out anywhere in the Bible. In fact it doesn't even mention the word "Trinity," or any of the other specialty words associated with it like triune, coequal, Godhead, hypostases, co-eternal, interpenetrating or my favorite—homousious.

Verse nineteen of today's reading is probably the clearest expression of the Trinitarian formula in the New Testament. That's the one that says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It is often called "The Great Commission," and is an awesome summary of what our faith's attitude toward others should be. The Great Commission is a timely message these days, making it clear that there is NO room in our faith for racism; ethnic or gender bias or discrimination. In Christ, as in Creation, we are all welcome and we are all one people. Racism is also prohibited in the other so-called Abrahamic religions—Judaism and Islam.

Unfortunately The Great Commission is missing from all Matthew manuscripts that are older than the fourth century. Scholars suspect it was added around then to reflect what had become the Church's understanding of the Trinity and also the church's proper mission.

Of course the Bible can also confuse us about God's Trinitarian nature. In the gospel of John, Jesus said he had to leave so that the Holy Spirit

could come and take his place. Today in Matthew, Jesus vowed personally to be with us always, to the end of the age.

But, oddly enough, he announced, “I will be with you always” just two chapters after saying, “You will NOT always have me with you.” Huh?

John Wesley said, "Bring me a worm that can comprehend a human being, and I will show you a human being that can comprehend the Triune God!" Martin Luther put it this way, “to deny the trinity endangers your salvation. But to understand the trinity endangers your sanity.”

The official Trinitarian position of the Church was actually formulated in response to various ancient heresies, as were the Apostles,' Nicene and Athanasian creeds that refute them.

In case you are unfamiliar with the Athanasian, it's like the Nicene Creed on steroids. In a nutshell, we Christians profess God as three persons—one being, with all three persons being co-eternal, co-equal and made of the same substance. That's what homoousios means: “made of the same substance.”

When it comes to the trinity, the church through the centuries has mostly focused on not getting it wrong rather than teaching exactly what is right. Not that that would be easy. Putting God in terms human beings can understand is really a matter of creating God in our own image, isn't it? And that's backwards. At least according to our first reading, from the book of Genesis.

I'm amazed that the battle between creation-story biblical literalists and Darwinian evolutionaries continues to make headlines. Today hundreds of public schools, and publicly-funded charter schools, primarily in the south teach creationism either instead of, or as an alternative to science. Truthfully, I don't understand how this got to be a contest or battle in the first place.

Today some think you are an atheist if you DON'T accept the Genesis creation accounts as literally true, while others think you are an idiot if you DO. Let's fix that. I admit I am mostly a science guy. At least since about my third year of college through the two decades of my first career as a health care professional.

When I switched to being a religion guy and went to seminary that didn't change. I've always found religion and science to be pretty compatible, like two sides of the same coin. To me, each answers questions that the other doesn't even ask.

Sadly, here in the age of science and reason when science and religion butt heads it's normally religion that takes the bigger hit. And we really should know better. St. Augustine was one of the church's great theologians back in the fourth and fifth centuries. He was Martin Luther's theological hero. In fact in his writings, speeches and sermons Luther quoted Augustine more than any source other than the Bible itself. Augustine warned even way back when that we shouldn't try to interpret parts of the Old Testament, especially the Genesis creation stories, literally.

He warned that science might one day prove them not to be factual, and if they are taught that way, then our faith's credibility would suffer. Which it certainly has.

Almost two-thirds of American adults now believe in some form of evolution, and sadly more and more of them are convinced that no God had anything to do with it. Augustine suggested we should view the Bible's creation stories allegorically—that they are there to teach us the “where” and the “why” and not so much the “how” or the “when.” Let the scientists figure that out.

You'd think Luther would have listened to him, but he didn't. In a 1537 Table Talk Luther criticized the cosmology of an upstart mathematician and astronomer named Nicolaus Copernicus. Copernicus had postulated

that the earth moves around the sun and not vice versa. Luther said no way. The Bible says otherwise.

But then Galileo came along and charted planetary movements using those newfangled telescopes and he ended up proving Copernicus right.

Meanwhile those religious zealots who had been pointing their fingers and calling scientists “heretics” and ‘atheists” looked pretty stupid.

The way I read them, the Bible’s creation stories don’t really address the science of it all. They tell of a loving God who created a beautiful world, with mountains, streams and sun, moon and stars. And unlike the creation myths of surrounding cultures, Genesis doesn’t portray creation as an accident resulting from a battle between competing cosmic deities. They tell instead of the one true God, who intentionally set into motion a universe that is good.

And an earth with beautiful lands, waterways, plants and animals all entrusted to the care of God’s greatest and most beloved creation: Human beings. Who come in beautiful colors and genders, from many different styles and walks of life.

As a science person, I am always fascinated by the intricate engineering of the human body and the complex biochemical processes and cell mutations that must have occurred over many millennia to make us what we are. And quite frankly, I am much more in awe of a God who did all that long-range planning and micro-engineering than I would be by one who one day just decided to breathe on a pile of mud and—poof—there’s Adam.

So I neither question any of the science of evolution nor any of the beautiful stories of the book of Genesis. And I’m not really sure if that makes me an atheist. Or an idiot.

Tradition attributes the authorship of Genesis to Moses. Scholars say, “Probably not.” Either way I suppose God could have decided to sit down and explain the science behind creation.

You know, with matter and antimatter colliding and destroying each other asymmetrically, resulting in energy, baryons and quarks; then moving on to the formation of hadrons and leptons, all of which underwent rapid isotropic expansion.

I suspect that a couple of hours into that talk, Moses (or whoever) would have yawned, and with his eyes glazed-over wrote down something like, “God said, let there be light.”

If I had been there I probably would have said something like, “You know God, science can fill in all those blanks for us later. Let’s instead talk about you. And please go very slowly when you get to the parts about the co-eternal triune godhead, hypostases and especially homoousious.”

Amen.