

bible⁺study: september 2018

Belton Joyner, Jr.

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

September 2, 2018 Text: Genesis 1:1-13 “God Created the Heavens and Earth”

In the almost seventeen years I have been writing these weekly commentaries, over and over again I have found that the most difficult to put together are those studies that engage very familiar texts. This week is a familiar text!

In Hebrew, there are primarily two different words for “create.” One of them is *yâsar*, the word used to describe what an artist might do in creating a work of art: taking some existing materials and re-arranging or fashioning them into some new arrangement. In this way, a sculptor might “create” a statue, using an ax and blade to chisel away from a block of wood.

The other word for “create” is *bārā*, a word that Thomas McComiskey has noted “emphasizes the initiation of the object.” In other words, it brings into being something new that has not existed before. This is the word the writer of Genesis uses to tell about the creation of the universe. The classic theological term for this understanding is *ex nihilo*...“out-of-nothing.”

Throughout the Old Testament, the word *bārā* is never used to depict human activity. It is limited to the work of God. Whatever creating we humans do always starts with something God has created.

It is significant that it was God who named the light “Day” and the dark-

ness “Night” (Genesis 1:5) and God who named the dome “Sky” (Genesis 1:8). In the Old Testament, if you named something, you controlled it and gave it its characteristics. [Remember how Abram’s name was changed to Abraham (Genesis 17:5) when Abram’s role took on new dimensions.] It is God who controls Light and Darkness, Day and Night.

Over the next few weeks, we shall be exploring various dimensions of the work of this Creator God. Regardless of the scientific revelations we encounter in our push to understand all of this, it is clear that Science can only tell us “how.” In these texts we have the answer as to “Who.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Francis Collins (*The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, Free Press) writes: “At least so far, scientists have been unable to interpret the very earliest events in the explosion (Big Bang), occupying the first 1043 (one tenth of a millionth or a millionth of a millionth of a millionth of a millionth of a millionth of a second).”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Loving Creator, we stand before the mystery of Your creation. Our words of understanding collapse and the best we can do is to offer praise and thanksgiving...”

September 9, 2018 Text: Genesis 1:14-25 “God Created Plants and Animals”

Although these verses are not clear as to whether or not God intended us to eat Brussel sprouts and chicken livers (my stomach tends to think not), the unfolding message is certain: God created plant life and animal life.

In this unfolding drama of creation, we hear God say over and over again: “It is good” (Genesis 1: 9, 12, 18, 21, 25). The word translated “good” is *tôwb*. One meaning of that word is “suited to its purpose.” Suppose I ask you if I can borrow a pen and you loan me a ballpoint. I write the note I need to make and hand the pen back to you and say, “That’s good. That’s just what I needed.” In other words, the pen was suited to the purpose.

God looks at the various creations and pronounces them suited to their purpose. And God has in place a system by which these animals reproduce themselves (Genesis 1:22). In this way, God continues to create. It’s what Eleanor Farjeon has written about in the hymn “Morning Has Broken.” “Morning has broken like the first morning...Praise for them springing fresh from the Word!...Praise with elation, praise every morning, God’s re-creation of the new day!” (See hymn 145 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*.)

Sometimes we ponder why God created certain things, mosquitos, for example. Is it because we have not appreciated their purpose in the cre-

ated order? Is it because we believe they are part of the creation broken by the Fall of Adam and Eve? Is it because we humans limit our view to what is best for us and forget that mosquitos are food for lots of animals? Is it because the mysteries of God’s created order far exceed the limits of human logic? Keep pondering.

As the writer tells it, the story is in the sixth day (sixth stage) of the flow of the created order (Genesis 1:31). I don’t know how the early readers and listeners understood the direction in which the account is moving, but today it is as if we have sneaked a peek at where the plot goes next. We know that before this sixth movement is over, humankind will be on the scene. Knowing what you know about humans, do you think this is climactic, anti-climactic, or just more of the story? Stay tuned.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Come Rain or Come Shine* (Putnam), Jan Karon describes a group who quit what they are doing to look at the signs of nature in a sunset: “You could tell a lot about people who would stop what they were doin’ to watch the Almighty go about his business.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “You have surrounded us with beauty, O God. Lead us in ways to protect it, preserve it, and enjoy it...”

September 16, 2018 Text: Genesis 1:26-31; 2:4-7 “God Created People”

The mystery of the creation of humankind is so profound that it is not surprising that God revealed two different stories to the writers of Genesis. One account tells about men and women being created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27) and the other account speaks of the creation of humans from the dirt (Genesis 2:7).

The word *adam* is usually applied as a name for the first man, but the word itself means “humanity.” In a sense, the story of Adam (humanity) and Eve (life-giver) is the story of each one of us.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? It means that we are created for relationships (Genesis 1:27). It means that we are created for stewardship of the life of the earth and its creatures (Genesis 1:28-29). It means we are created from the very breath of God (Genesis 2:7).

At the committal that follows a funeral service, we often hear the words “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Do you remember the Ash

Wednesday service a few months ago? With the imposition of ashes came this reminder: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These liturgical phrases reflect the reality of Genesis 2:7 and give an assurance that our entire journey, birth to death and beyond, is within the purview of God’s watchful care and creation.

There is a play on words in Hebrew that does not come across in English. As noted above, *adam* is a word that means humanity or human being. In Genesis 2:6-8, the word that is translated “fertile land” (in Common English Bible) is *adamah*. The writer who recorded this revelation captured something of the connection between human beings and the environment. No wonder that care for the land runs so near to the heart of the creation story (Genesis 1:28-30). There is a difference between domination and dominion (King James Version). Human beings are not called to dominate the environment, but to have dominion (responsibility) for it.

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Take another look at these tellings of God’s creation of human beings. This was not a one time event. You and I are ourselves evidence that God continues to create human beings. Dare I add...”created in the image of God”?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Claus Westermann (*Genesis*, Augsburg) wrote “Humanity exists in community, as one beside the other...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “You have, O God, created in love...”

September 23, 2018 Text: Genesis 2:18-24; 4:1-2 “God Created the Family”

This week’s study shows the expansion of the human family. What do you remember about your family of origin?

I was the youngest of three children and the only boy, thus I grew up totally unspoiled. (This is my story, so I’m telling it my way!) Growing up, I lived in Faison, Chadbourn, Fairmont, and Siler City. My father was a pastor; he died when I was in the eighth grade. My mother was a stay-at-home mom until she took on a teaching career after my father’s death. Both of my sisters were top-of-the-class honor graduates of Greensboro College.

I just wrote those words without any forethought or planning. Isn’t it interesting the things that come to mind when we “free range” thoughts about family!

At the heart of the Genesis account of the family of origin of all of us is Genesis 2:18: “It is not good that the human is alone.” We are designed for relationships. When Eve gave birth to Cain, his mother said “I have given life to a man with the Lord’s help.” (Genesis 4:1). The biblical writers understood that new life, family, and relationships were part of God’s intent for God’s human creation.

Even by putting this account with an example of a man-wife-child family, the Genesis story does not exhaust the possibilities of human

relationships. Family is not defined only biologically. Family is defined relationally. In fact, the name “Cain” (Genesis 4:1) means “creates” and the name “Abel” (Genesis 4:2) means “breath.” The names “Creates” and “Breath” do not seem limiting, but expansive and inclusive. I still remember when my friend Beth Norris thanked the annual conference for support after the death of her husband, Allen. She said, “I want to thank my blood family and my water family.” Wow! She acknowledged her biological kin and her kinships within the baptized community.

So, the creation story begins with a sense of community, a togetherness created by God: Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel. When those relationships live out that oneness, they reflect the God who created them. But, alas, we know there is a “rest of the story.” Individualism replaces community. Next week.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Daily Devotions for Die-Hard Fans* (McMinn), Ed McMinn wrote: “Like it or not, you have a family, and that’s God’s doing. God cherishes the family so much that he chose to live in one as a son, a brother, and a cousin.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Parent of us all...”

September 30, 2018 Text: Genesis 3:8-17, 22-24 “God Creates; Humans Sin”

Where do you go when you want to hide from God? In this Genesis account, Adam and Eve (in this story, those are names for you and me!) think they can get away from God by hiding among the garden trees (Genesis 3:8). It doesn’t work. God sees them.

It is interesting that once that the couple’s relationship with God is broken (Genesis 3:6), they are also broken in their relationship with one another. A broken relationship with God can destroy our human relationships---between individuals, between races, between nations. Notice what happens: once they violate God’s will, Adam and Eve are suddenly embarrassed about their own relationship with each other. Being naked had not bothered them before, but now they feel so separated from each other, that they make clothes out of fig leaves (Genesis 3:7). Our relationship with one another may well be a reflection of our relationship with God.

Because Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:4-6), they now must have known that what they did was evil, was wrong. But, instead of confession, they begin the blame game (Genesis 3:12-13). Even when God spells out the punishments for their sin (Genesis 3:14-19), the pair offer no remorse or admission of guilt. There is no repentance.

God is just (God expels them from access to the tree of life)—Genesis

3:23-24, but God is merciful (God gave them better clothes and gave them fertile land for crops)—Genesis 3:20-23

In theological language, these events are referred to as the Fall. Because this disobedience is part of our origins, the consequence is referred to as “original sin.” Note the title of this session; it is in the present tense. “God *Creates*”...”Humans *Sin*.” God continues to create and we continue to sin.

Does this sound familiar? Now, we can understand why we think of the Adam and Eve story (“human being” and “life-giver” story) as our story. Sometimes we say that “Names have been changed to protect the innocent.” In this case, perhaps the names are changed to protect the guilty!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Methodism in the American Forest* (Oxford), Russell Richey notes that John Wesley “conjectured that ‘All the beasts of the field, and all the fowls of the air, were with Adam in paradise.’” Then Richey adds “Adam’s fall damaged the entire creation not just humanity.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Loving Creator, we have sinned against You and against one another...”

