

Genesis 2:4b-25

It is a fine thing to mark a new holiday in the church, is it not? We need reasons in our lives to celebrate, and giving joyful thanks for the whole of creation is a great excuse. In fact, right now, without thinking about it too much, on the count of three, I'd like everyone to shout out one thing in creation they're especially thankful for: it could be your puppy or a favorite oak tree or the lake in your backyard or even your spouse (they need love too).

See? Lots of beings to be thankful for. We'll keep celebrating this season through the month of September, and I hope we'll see it grow and deepen in years to come. But meanwhile you may have questions. Why a new holy day? Why now? Actually, this feast day has been practiced in Eastern Rite churches since the 7th century, and has its roots in antiquity. In 1989, the nominal head of the Orthodox church sent out a call to the "entire Christian world" to pray for creation on September 1, and slowly that call took root within ecumenical circles and became a process for finding common ground both theologically and practically.

Some of its emphases are: that God was busy creating even before time began and so creation transcends time; that God's creative process is ongoing (it didn't just stop on the sixth day but continues into the now); and that God made creation out of love (there was no need for God to create; God just wanted to). And finally, celebrating this feast together helps to make all this creative activity present to us now, in the same way that celebrating the Lord's Supper helps to make Jesus' body and blood present to us.

We'll also circle back to a notion that I think a lot of us have difficulty getting our head around—that creation comes into being through Christ. It's helpful, although not a perfect explanation, to think of Jesus as that segment of Christ's eternal timeline that came down and intersected with our human plane. Christ's self continues infinitely into the past and into the future.

For example our text from John this morning says, “In the beginning was the Word, and all things came into being through him.” Christ our Alpha brought us into being in the beginning, and Christ our Omega will be there in our completion and redemption. “In Christ there is a new creation.”

So there’s a lot of thinky stuff here, but it all comes down to this. Everything we are and everything we have is from God. We can lose sight of this fact, or we can delight in it. And I choose to find delight in all the ways the Divine Imagination continues to come up with features that I could never dream of. Think of trees grown so tall that only a long-necked giraffe can browse them. Think of dinosaurs brightly colored like tropical fish. Think of the Canadian Shield—bedrock constituting the ancient geologic core of the North American continent, between 2.5 and 4.2 billion years old. Think of all these things fitting together so well that when the black-footed ferret population gets in trouble, the prairie dogs who constitute their prey begin to decline as well.

Which brings us, in a roundabout way, to our first reading for today. Here’s a flash Bible quiz for you. When Noah brings animals onto the ark before the flood, how many of each kind does he choose? Partly right. Genesis 7.2 says: “Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals,^[a] the male and his mate, and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and his mate, ³ and seven pairs^[b] of the birds of the heavens also, male and female, to keep their offspring alive on the face of all the earth.”

And then how many days and nights does it keep flooding? Partly correct—Genesis 7.24 says it didn’t stop for 150 days. So there are really two versions of the flood story interwoven, and they contradict each other a little, but we don’t worry about it much because we’re not looking to Genesis as a natural history text but as a testament to God’s faithfulness to God’s covenant.

And the same thing turns out to be true for the story of creation. Hopefully by this point in your life you’ve figured out for yourself how you want to hold the prose poem of God’s creation of the world in only six days, and how the

scripture lovingly catalogs all manner of phenomena and life forms in a way appropriate to its time. But as with the flood story, there is also a second creation story that varies significantly from the first one, and that is the story of Genesis 2.

There are some speed bumps in the text and we'll get to those in a minute, but first let's take a really close look at the way God creates in this second chapter. In this version, God creates humanity (*adam*) first, before all the other animals. And then God creates a perfect garden of pleasure for the human creature: everything beautiful and good to eat, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And God makes the human person a gardener or steward of this lovely place, and realizes that the human really needs a partner.

"It is not good for the human to be alone." Now you'll notice I keep saying "human" and not "man," because in the Hebrew, there is no mention yet of a man. Just an undifferentiated form of human.

Anyway, at this point God gets out God's Rolodex of creation and gets to work looking for a partner for this human being: "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the human to see what he would call them, and whatever the human called every living creature, that was its name." What seems remarkable about this passage is that God sees the relationship between humans and animals as so close, so intimate, that God thought they might conceivably become life partners.

But instead: "The human gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air and to every animal of the field, but for the human^[d] there was not found a helper as his partner." And so God makes a partner (Hebrew *ezer*) for the human by putting him into a deep sleep and cleaving his side (*tsela*--not merely a rib). The effect of this creation narrative is not that the two creatures, now for the first time called man (*ish*) and woman (*ishah*), are so different, but that they're so alike, are such mirror images, that they practically constitute each other's flesh and bone.

Ultimately then it's a story about sacred connections—between God and humanity, between people and animals, between human beings of any gender. We care about each other because we were made for each other. Because Christ first loved us, loved you, the whole world goes around. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people”. Amen.