

Sermon – “In the Beginning, To the End”
Sunday, June 11, 2017
Scripture Readings: Genesis 1:1-2:3, Matthew 28:16-20
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Today’s first reading comes from the very beginning of the very first book of the Bible. Hear God’s Word in the story of the creation of the world.

^{1:1} In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² 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. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness [God] called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷ 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. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together [God] called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ 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.” ²¹ 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. ²² God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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.”

*²⁷ So God created humankind in [God’s] image,
in the image of God [God] created them;
male and female [God] created them.*

²⁸ 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.” ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

^{2:1} Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And on the seventh day God finished the work that [God] had done, and [God] rested on the seventh day from all the work that [God] had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that [God] had done in creation.

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Today’s second reading gives us the very last words of the Gospel According to Matthew, sharing Jesus’s commission and promise to his disciples taking place after his resurrection. Listen for the Word of God to you in Matthew 28, verses 16-20.

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

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Creation is at the heart of both of our scripture readings for today. The very world itself is built, formed, and proclaimed good by God in the first chapter of Genesis. The creation of the worldwide body of Christian believers is begun in the last chapter of Matthew.

In the beginning, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Darkness of another sort covered the earth later, and the light of Christ was sent forth to all the peoples of the world—“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.”

We could note endless details about the account given us in the first chapter of Genesis (which is one reason we return to it regularly), but we will make just a couple of particular observations about it today.

One thing it is hard to escape noticing is that the way this story is told it gives a clear kind of primacy of God over the world. God does not wrestle the world into submission to shape it into its form, like we do. Humans grapple with the earth when we move it; it is a test of the force of our muscle, and of the mechanical muscle we can bring to bear on it. The God we hear of here, though, is not a creature like us within and subject to the world and the forces it contains. God, rather, decides it and declares it, and it is so.

The other thing we'll take special note of is the intriguing developmental nature of creation here. It comes about day by day, step by step. There is an order to it, one thing and then another, distinctly separated and taking place over time. It moves from general creation and broad formation, to specific configuration, from the inanimate to simple life to complex life to intelligent life, and finally from building the structure *of* the universe to giving instruction for structure *within* the universe.

We have light and darkness on day one, the separation of the elements on day two. The initiation of life begins on day three, and specificity within the heavens is declared on day four. Day five sees animal life, in the seas and in the skies. Day six begins with animal life on land and builds up to human life, created in the very image of God.

But this last day of creation activity still is not quite finished, moving finally from “mere” creation of things into the instillation of purpose. Having now created creatures with intelligence and will, God gives the first command that perhaps *can be disobeyed*, one meant not just to make something so but to be *heard*, and *understood*: a command to humans about what they are to do: “Be fruitful and multiply,” God begins, and goes on to give them further instruction, to tell them of their place and role out among the many elements of creation.

It is this last directive which most reminds us of the sort of creation found in our Gospel reading from Matthew. The followers of Jesus are instructed, much as the first humans in Genesis were, to go out into the world and make something in particular of it. God's intended order was placed in the hands of humans in the beginning of the world. And after all of his own miraculous deeds and his resurrection, Jesus, here in his final recorded words in Matthew, again gives the carrying out and living out of his Christly purpose into the hands of his followers.

One might expect, with a God whose word is power over all things, who merely says it and it is so, that all creation would simply be accomplished, all at once, instantaneously. But it is not. It proceeds as a process, and in both the beginning of the world and the ongoing creation of the church, we, humankind, are invited into that process. This is inspiring, but it also creates some pressure! And possibly confusion, as well. What does it mean, “make disciples”?

In the Reformed tradition within Christianity, the conventional habit is to place all our emphasis on God's work, and little on our own. We remember that it is God who chooses us, who calls us, and who turns our hearts to Christ. God is seen as the primary mover who makes disciples of us; less prominence is given to the sense in which we become disciples ourselves; and least of all to the idea that we “make” other persons into disciples.

And yet here is language along those lines from Christ himself. “[M]ake disciples of all nations.” To make is to create. His hearers are thus given active, creative work in the spreading of the faith and the growth of the church. But how? To “make” someone into something seems like a kind of power we simply don't have over one another. And it also carries a little bit of hint, to my ears anyway, of a sort of single, magical-sounding action of conversion.

A little bit of the difficulty comes in simply through the attempt to render this in English, and different translators have made different wording choices here. “Make disciples” is, in fact, just a single word in the original Greek, a verb which means something like “to disciple,” “to teach,” or “to train in discipleship.”

This suggests that making disciples, like the making of the world, is again a process. What one might call “conversion” might indeed happen—a sudden tipping point, an awakening in a person, a realization, a recognition that the course ahead in one’s faith life is very different from the road traveled up to now—but that moment is not the fullness of the concept of being made a disciple.

Being made into a disciple means being trained, mentored, taught, cared for. As the first humans were given an ongoing responsibility, so are the first disciples, a responsibility not just to baptize but to teach, support, tutor, and pass along *everything*, the full breadth of what they have learned from following Jesus Christ.

How appropriate that we should be reminded of this responsibility today! For this weekend we have not one but two special things we are stopping to note. First, we are receiving new members, and Friday night this church hosted a gathering celebrating all the new members of the past year.

We should remember that this is a big deal! This is not a social club; this is a local manifestation of the body of Christ. When we become members, we do not simply sign a piece of paper, go through an initiation process, and then wear a new color of nametag or carry a card that gives us discounts and other privileges. Membership in a church is more like a marriage; it is a covenantal commitment. We affirm that we share the foundation of Christ, and we promise to be faithful parts of a single body, to make disciples of one another and to be made disciples by one another. Professing or reaffirming our faith, and pledging ourselves to this particular family of followers of Christ, is only day one of our own creation story in the church.

The other thing we call attention to and pledge our commitment to in this weekend’s worship, in a special commissioning liturgy [tomorrow morning], is the work of all those who will lead in Vacation Bible School over the coming week. Here, too, is something important!

VBS is not day care, or a party, or a mere collection of interesting crafts, stories, games, and lessons. This is the schooling of disciples. In which the adults *and* the children of the church are schooled by one another, to be sure, but we want to recognize that there is something important going on in the training of new disciples by those with age and experience. This is how the church moves from age into age, and this is one small part of our great commission to go and make disciples.

This is no easy task, but we are not left alone to it. One famous philosophical outlook on the nature of God’s relationship with the universe, a position taken by Deists, among others, has God as having created the universe much as a clockmaker might have constructed the intricate inner workings of a delicate piece of timekeeping machinery, then having set it in motion and left it entirely to itself. Everyone knows, surely, that this is indeed how our lives as residents of this universe feel at times.

But our Bible does not begin with Genesis relating the story of creation and then offering instruction only to skip to God's final re-appearance at the conclusion of the world. There are 1,166 chapters in between Genesis 1 and the beginning of Revelation, and God is manifestly present throughout the whole. Jesus, right after giving that very tall order that is the Great Commission, makes this explicit, as a promise: "And remember," he says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

So we follow, having heard ourselves the words those eleven brought to those who brought them to us, and we remember God's invitation to take part in the creative work of bringing Christ to the whole world. May God be with us and keep us in this, always, from the beginning to the end. Amen.