

“When Finishing is Just the Beginning”

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Children’s Readers Chorus – 8 sections with posterboard illustrations

I’ve struggled with how to begin this sermon...with how to find the right words *to begin* a sermon about the “beginnings” of the created world as it is revealed in Scripture. All week I’ve kind of known where this sermon was going, that is, where I want to “end up”...I’ve known what the “charge” is, or the “take away” for us, because it has been haunting my heart...not in a Halloween-ish way, but in an ever-present way.

We preachers live with this “haunting in our hearts” by the way...day in and day out. The definition of haunting is to “*continually seek the company of*”¹...and that’s what God does with us preachers, with all of us really, but especially us preachers...God continues to nudge Godself into our hearts and heads and we can’t get away from the message that is lurking in the text.

Sometimes the message is obvious and glaring...most times it is more subtle and it seems to simmer up out of the pages...giving us whiffs of where we might go with this

text...but either way – it’s a haunting feeling. It’d be nice to read Scripture every now and again and *not* have it speak it me...just to have it be words on a page that have no real meaning for my life or yours...but if you’re a preacher...everything – from Scripture to your conversation over coffee to the latest movie to the news headlines to the book on your bedside table...it all has “meaning.” Some of you retired ministers out there know what I’m talking about. I’ve been told that it never goes away – even when you retire: this haunting and hovering feeling that there is a message arising out of the text...and out of the world...that must be spoken.

I wonder if that is not the very thing that’s happening at the beginning of the first chapter of the first book of our Scriptures...there is a mystery about the *tohu wabohu*, that is in Hebrew, “the chaotic, formless void” that is covering the face of the deep...a mystery about the wind from God that’s hovering over the waters...sweeping them into order before speaking everything else into being.

It’s almost as if God, as God hovers

¹ Accessed at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/haunting> on 19 June 2011.

over the chaos of the deep, has a haunting feeling that there is something arising out of this chaos...that must be spoken into being. Maybe God doesn't even know what that is yet...maybe the order comes through *the very act of beginning*...of taking it one step at a time...day by day.

Maybe the rhythmic order and vivid imagery that we read about in Genesis 1 (and also Genesis 2 for that matter), is more neat and tidy than the act of creating the world actually was.

Allow me to be God for a minute:

*“Okay – let there be light.
Hmm...That’s good.”*

“Except that the waters need to be separated...we need something kind of fluid down here and atmospheric up here – oceans...and sky. That’s good.”

*“But neither of those things are too stable...need something a bit more solid...okay...ground. (stomp feet)
That’s good.”*

I'm being light-hearted here, but could it be that God, as God hovered over the deep, had an *idea* or even a *vision* about where the whole thing would end up – how it would finish – but perhaps didn't know exactly how to begin?

I like to think so. Because I like to think that even for God – beginning something is an act of great creativity and effort...it's not something that is “abracadabra” easy. They call them “birthing pains” for a reason. And you know what follows “birthing pains”...”growing pains...” --- whatever has a beginning...has a continual evolution...a continual unfolding, if you will...and of course, as long as we are still praying “*Thy Kingdom Come on Earth as it is in Heaven*” (as we just did) – then we are still in those “growing pains”...that time of continual creation.

You've heard the quote from 1st Century Roman Philosopher Seneca, “*Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.*” Some of you probably had no idea that was from a philosopher because you know the line from *SemiSonic's* song “Closing Time.” Well – now you know.

This is how I see the first chapter of Genesis. It is the first creation story of two that we have in our Scriptures...the second coming in Genesis chapter two. They are very different. But it's interesting really...because where the first one “ends”...with the creation of man and woman...the second one begins...it starts with God breathing life into the dust of the ground to form man...and the rest of creation unfolds from there.

Both stories though...begin with the breath of God – the *ruah* (Spirit, wind) of God...they begin with a sense of life that is yet to be...

I want to read you a poem by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, director of The Shalom Center, a man named by the United Nations as a “Wisdom Keeper,” and in 2007, named by Newsweek - one of the fifty most influential American rabbis.

On Deciding Whether To...

Beresheit in the beginning
God was lonely, suffering
though everything in the universe was held within.
Unfulfilled, overpowered by *chesed*-energy
God breathed out, kissed out, sent it all out,
every possibility that ever was and would be.
I imagine God was frightened.
What a terribly momentous step,
even with overflowing love as catalyst and reference
point.
What if something went wrong
if the universe made its own choices at breakneck
speed
if there was no breathing any of it back in again.
Once it began, this process more powerful than its
Creator
with beginning middle end all at once, all possible --
how could there not have been Divine panic?
So in the split second eon after that first outbreath
kiss
a proclamation "Let there be light!" and there was
a moment when sight would be unhampered
a snapshot flash of eternity in which to see
before darkness was once again welcomed
the realm of comfort from all the see-ing.

So, too, in the beginning
the universe breathed its kiss into me
and with that kiss, possibilities
thousands of them
limited only by the chance of time and place.
And the world, spurred on not by love
but by something far more selfish, far more limited
intervened
to remind me of the correct response to light and

darkness
according to the desires of many faces, many
voices.

My panic is undeniably mortal
gripping me during folding laundry or cooking
dinner.

As I stand as witness before the creation of my life,
well into its 3rd day
I try commanding light out of the confusion
but I lack Divine will
and all brilliance is gone
before I have a chance to see into the flash.
I can only comfort myself with the thought
that even God didn't know if the plan would work,
but moved forward into the darkness on faith.²

Maybe God didn't know if the plan
would work out – but that didn't keep
God from moving forward...from
beginning...

Friends, in *this* beginning (*point to Bible*) God's spirit swept and God's voice spoke. And God continued to speak...to the Israelites (over and over and over again)...and then God uttered that Word that would forever change our lives...that “Word made Flesh” that word of “Love Incarnate”...Jesus. God has continued to speak through the church and certainly outside of the church as well. And to borrow the popular tag line from the United Church of Christ, “*God is Still Speaking...*”³

And I would add to that – God is still creating. There's no question about that. The question remains with us – with you and me – are we finishing

² Accessed at <http://www.theshalomcenter.org/node/282> on 18 June 2011.

³ Accessed at <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/> on 19 June 2011.

what God so creatively and amazingly has begun? As Paul writes, are we finishing the good work in us that has been begun by a faithful God who promises to complete it?⁴

Our children helped us hear again and visualize again – what God’s creativity looks like. Their own creativity is inspiration in and of itself for me. But it’s time for us to imagine, for ourselves, again – what God’s creativity looks like as it works in and through us.

Artist Michele Shea says, “*Creativity is seeing something that doesn’t exist already. You need to find out how you can bring it into being and that way be a playmate with God.*”⁵

Most of us probably haven’t thought ourselves to be a playmate since our childhood when perhaps we went on play dates with our friends after preschool. Perhaps those of you who are parents or grandparents or those of you who care for kids on a regular basis fancy yourself a playmate because you find yourself down on your knees a lot...drawing with sidewalk chalk, playing make-believe in Playskool kitchens and dollhouses, or perhaps building with Legos. Could it be that the way you bend down to play with a child---to create, to imagine, to construct---could it be that God is awaiting us in that playful

⁴ Philippians 1:6.

⁵ Taken from my own personal quote book.

posture as well? Sitting down next to us...on our level...with something really fun...like a brand new box of Legos or a brand new box of crayons...waiting for us to come and be a co-creator?

Perhaps for God – Legos are really the bricks and mortar that make up a Habitat home.

Perhaps for God – PlaySkool Kitchens are really the ovens in our homes that bake bread for first time guests here at Calvary.

Perhaps for God – Boxes of Sidewalk Chalk and Crayons are really the hues of our humanity...the colors of the human race...like we all grew up singing, “*Red and Yellow Black and White, We are precious in His Sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.*”⁶ There are many other colors of course...there are many other playmates for us to co-create and dream with.

Perhaps the next play date that God has scheduled for us is with the members of the IHN families that will be staying here with us in a week...maybe that’s who we are to be sitting around the table with for snack time...or even for nap time, if you volunteer to stay the night.

⁶ From the hymn, *Jesus Loves the Little Children*, with words by C. Herbert Woolston and music by George F. Root.

I think God is actually...beckoning us to creativity in this way...calling us to finish the creation that God has begun...the creation that God named as totally and utterly “good”...the creation that brought us into being so that we might continue to create the Kingdom of God that surely must look something like a land of peace and justice and hope and grace and love and forgiveness and compassion.

Surely that’s what the Scriptures mean when they say that we are “created in God’s image.” The very first “image” – the very first “picture” of God that we are given in the Bible – is that of God as Creator...and a Good Creator, at that. How are you reflecting God the Creator in how you live your life?

God spoke Creation into its beginning...including you...God spoke you into being...calling you by name...God began a good work in you...and God is by your side...wanting to continue to create with you. With me.

On this Father’s Day...we are reminded of the gift of our earthly fathers who brought us into being and played a key role with God...and with our mothers...in bringing us into being. Listen to this beautiful image that writer John Gregory Brown has one of his books: *“There’s something like a line of gold thread running*

*through a man’s words when he talks to his daughter, and gradually over the years it gets to be long enough for you to pick it up in your hands and weave it into a cloth that feels like love itself.”*⁷

It is Trinity Sunday – a day where we think especially about God as Father...as one in relationship with his Son – Jesus - and in relationship with the Holy Spirit. The gold thread running through God the Father’s words...as He speaks to us as sons and daughters...is already woven into a cloth that is Love Itself...Love Incarnate. Paul reminds us that in Christ, we already are a new creation.⁸ We are part of that Spoken Word Made Flesh – a part of the Body of Christ that seeks to live and love as Jesus did when he was in human bodily form 2,000 years ago. It’s that “hands and feet of Christ thing again.” The creativity God began...Jesus continued...because Jesus taught us and teaches us a new way of life, a new way of loving, that frankly, takes some creativity sometimes – some risk. Some dreaming.

A preacher in his own right, singer song-writer Bono of U2 has said, *“When the story of these times gets written, we want it to say that we did all we could, and it was more than*

⁷ From John Gregory Brown’s book, *Decorations in a Ruined Cemetery*, 1994.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

anyone could have imagined.”⁹

Such a thing is being said about another musician - legendary rock saxophonist Clarence Clemons who died yesterday of complications from a stroke.

Clemons had played saxophone in Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band off and on since 1972. This is what Springsteen said about his Clarence:

Clarence lived a wonderful life. He carried within him a love of people that made them love him. He created a wondrous and extended family. He loved the saxophone, loved our fans and gave everything he had every night he stepped on stage...His loss is immeasurable and we are honored and thankful to have known him and had the opportunity to stand beside him for nearly 40 years. He was my great friend, my partner and with Clarence at my side, my band and I were able to tell a story far deeper than those simply contained in our music. His life, his memory, and his love will live on in that story and in our band.¹⁰

Friends, you are God's great friend...God's partner...and with you by God's side...and all of us by one another's sides...God is able to tell a story far deeper and wide-reaching than the story simply contained in these pages (*point to Bible*). Your life,

your service, and your love is the very witness that allows this story (*point to Bible*) to live on in the world...and to come to its full completion.

We all have to start somewhere. Lucky for us, God already got the ball rolling...

Amen.

For benediction:

God's "finishing" of Creation in Genesis is just the "beginning" of our creating in the world. It begins with God, and it continues with our willingness and our imagination...

If you've noticed...I've tried to engage your imagination and creativity through the arts today: through the illustrations from our children, through poetry, through song...and now in one more way:

Listen one more time to the story of our beginnings...and as you listen...may its words be your benediction – that is, your blessing, your call, and your challenge for this day:

Read "Partners" on pages 1-3 in *Does God Have a Big Toe?: Stories About Stories in the Bible* by Marc Gellman and Oscar de Mejo. Copyright 1989, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY.

Amen.

⁹ From my own personal quote book.

¹⁰The CNN Wire Staff, *E Street sax man Clarence Clemons dies*, 18 June 2011. Accessed at http://www.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/Music/06/18/clarence.clemons.obit/index.html?hpt=hp_t1 on 18 June 2011.