
Creation Vocation

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 15, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

“In the beginning God...” I wish I wrote that phrase. “In the beginning God...” The most read book in the world, the Bible, has an incomparable start for incomparable art because “in the beginning, God created.” I’m not here to continue the debate between creationists and evolutionists on whether this Genesis passage is scientific fact or whether we should read this literally or figuratively. This passage and book, like all of the other books of the Bible, are theological documents that make theological affirmations and assertions. We can read books of the Bible like sermons. Genesis is preaching to us this morning and what a beginning. To start in the way it does is clearly a theological move—“In the beginning, God.” The writer of Genesis has something to say about God and placing God first is a way to remind us that in everything God is the starting point, the subject of every sentence in our life. It is a gentle reminder to begin each day and each project with God. God is in the beginning and is the beginning and God has the first word and will have the last.

In the beginning, God is apparently in a good mood because God keeps saying, “it was good.” God was not cranky or anxious on the morning of creation though he had every reason to be because in the beginning there was a “formless void and darkness.” At the outset of this biblical narrative, we discover the truth about the world. There is God and there is a void. There is divine presence but there seems to also be the presence of an absence, a void in the world and perhaps in our lives. From the beginning of creation, we are confronted with the realities of God and what some may call “chaos” or the “formless void.” The earth is in disarray or disordered. Traditional teaching has usually asserted that God created *ex nihilo*, that is, ‘out of nothing’ but there is actually something there—“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.” Earth, wind, and water were the preconditions for God’s work. Material elements, though not ordered, were present but there was still a void, awaiting the creative sound and transformative touch of an Artisan’s voice and hands, waiting for divine intervention to make meaning out of chaos and the formlessness of a void.

The presence of a void comes in many forms. Poet Dorothy Thomas writes of a particular kind when she says,

*Yours was a lovely voice when you were young,
A sweet contralto voice for hymn or round.
But at your work, or come to tie our bonnets on,
You’d whistle, like a mockingbird.*

*The last of life was far from fair to you,
And not for it the first of life was made....*

*You called our names, saw others in our place.
You shook the clock to make it tell the time.
We thought that you had gone past all recall
And mourned your spirit, lifted from its shell.*

*And then one morning, handed you your cup;
You warmed your hands to it and smiled us past,
O’d up your lips and whistled five sweet notes—
As though a bird flew through a ruined house.*

This poem may refer to one who is struggling with Alzheimer's. The person is always there but not really always there. It appears that their spirit has gone and flown away like a bird and all that remains is a shell of memories from the past. The music is gone and one has lost their previous mental form leaving a void of sorts. Or, even when a loved one dies but their bedroom stays intact like it was when they were alive, the presence of the absence, the void, is particularly strong. Their photos, trophies, work desk, books, special blankets, clothing, favorite reading chair, their smell— are still there in the room, yet there is a void. On a larger scale, natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis, or the catastrophe of war can wipe out friends and family, creating a void in our communities, putting us in disarray. It may not be that the earth is a formless void but your life feels like one and you search and search for ways, not always healthy ones, to fill it. What or who once was will never be again and you wonder whether the void will ever go away. The Lord's Prayer is not your nightly petition but "take this cup from me" is.

The void speaks seemingly louder than God but in the beginning when darkness covered the face of the deep, what was—the formless void— would never be the same once God got a hold of it. God shows a discontentment with the formless void and darkness and his response may be surprising. "In the beginning, God created." God responds to the formless void with creative activity. God does not pout or take a nap or fold his hands in prayer or just sit on the couch to watch World Cup soccer; God gets to work. And God is not overwhelmed by the chaos; rather, like poetry, God brings order to chaos, makes meaning out of messiness as Lord over any chaos and Lord of creation.

Genesis doesn't necessarily present the absolute beginning of all things but the genesis of God's orderly creation. The poetry of God's creation is art and art frames the world and brings meaning and form to life. In response to formlessness, we find a holy symmetry of creation—there was evening and morning...; God said, "let there be.."; And it was so; "God saw that it was good"; there was evening and morning. Over and over again, we hear this rhythmic response to the void. This poetic pattern would almost suggest that God is a poet and as poet, God becomes "priest of the invisible"(Wallace Stevens), helping us see anew, recognizing how he may be at work even in the void.

There's beauty and life in God's creative activity, which should not be surprising when the duet of word and spirit join together. The spirit or wind broods over the waters and God speaks the word of God and worlds come into being, perhaps even giving us a Trinitarian glimpse at creation. Whenever spirit and word come together throughout scripture, like with the Virgin Mary, there is the product of life. As humans, we may talk ourselves to death sometimes, but here, though God speaks a lot, God talks creation into life, showing us "how to do things with words" (J.L. Austin).

Much of God's creativity occurs through speech and God speaks into the void, not with fighting words but lighting words, words that illuminate a world and light our path. God's first words are "let there be light." This is how God reacts to the darkness—God creates light. No name-calling, no evil for evil but divine creative words of light and life, which is very different from malformed words that we might have spoken or heard in the past, words that still bounce around in our minds and hearts doing damage till this day. But God's poetic creativity is a form of resistance to darkness and the formless void. God fills the void with creation and creativity.

Yet, God's artwork of creation, as one Old Testament scholar writes, "is not a sudden one-day affair; God doesn't snap the divine fingers and immediately bring the creation into being. God takes time in creating: There was evening and morning, one day, two days... and given that God has been creating through the millennia, I wonder what number today is for God. Bringing the creation into being over time signals that creation is a dynamic process and not a finished product" (Terence Fretheim). God is always creating, always adding, never ceasing. A formless void is not the end with this God who is always moving like "a wind ... sweeping over the face of the waters," never on summer vacation, eternally on duty in and out of season. Why is this?

Because there will always be a void somewhere in the world or in your heart. There will always be a need for God's light and poetry and art and creative work for without light and the One who is light, we would die. And without creativity and beauty, we would cease to be fully human made in the image of God. St. Irenaeus, from the 2nd-3rd centuries, said:

*For even at its beginning
the humble clay received
God's art, whereby
one part became the eye,
another the ear, and yet
another this impetuous hand.*

('Capable Flesh' adapted and translated Scott Cairns)

We are touched as God's handiwork. We are created by the divine artisan who spoke us into existence and breathed life into our formlessness. We "received God's art" and as humans created in God's image, we are called to continue to create in the face of formless voids and darkness just as God did in the beginning. To be in God's image is to be in community, ultimately the *koinonia*, the fellowship within the triune God, but it also means to be creative and to create, which is a sign of the divine imprint on our lives. In the beginning, God. But also in the beginning, there was creation.

When a void is experienced by someone due to a tragedy like a car accident, one may find roadside memorials created at the location where the accident happened. Crosses decorated with multicolored flowers. Notes scribbled on small pieces of paper with memories and expressions of love. Poetry from family members. Photographs of good times in the past. Where there is a void, roadside memorials allow for creative responses to the void. The artwork that is left is a way of declaring, "let there be light" though the gaping hole of darkness is so deep. The beauty of floral wreaths laid on the war veteran memorial outside of the Divinity School is our human way of speaking into the void and to bring grief and love to form and not allow darkness to speak to us louder than light. Our creative artistic responses are an attempt to bring meaning and order to life's difficult situations and to allow life to have the final word. To allow light, God's first word, to speak.

When vigils are held for those killed by gun violence and candles are lit, this light of ours is a creative response to fill the void and represents a human poem of light, to speak light and be light wherever we may find ourselves. Nurses, engineers, lawyers, school teachers, college professors, ministers, insurance consultants, musicians, students. The call is to create aesthetic light wherever and whoever you may be. To make beauty out of chaos—this is the vocation of God's creation. It is a vocation that never takes a vacation because creative ministry never stops.

At the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, they have a gift shop. In that shop, they sell glass angel ornaments. What is special about these ornaments is that they are created out of broken glass from broken glass bottles or glass broken during a battle between Israelis and Palestinians in Bethlehem. From pieces of rubble, a sign of redemption. Beauty from brokenness. Creation out of so much chaos.

As Christians, we're called by God to be artists of hope until the day that God fills the voids once and for all as our all in all. The poetry of creativity in Genesis is a promise that formless voids do not last forever and will not be victorious. This is why we can rest, not just on the seventh day, but every day. God said creation was good and it is. May you create in the void, speak in the void, write in the void, sing in the void, dance in the void, and quilt in the void, for in your creative endeavor you will find the Creator God and light for any darkness you may encounter.

God spoke and took a rest. Now let me do the same.