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Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

A Close Distance

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Genesis 1

The question came from a second grader. She had been studying the creation story in Genesis with her church school class. After class was over she saw me in the hallway and asked, “How do we know it happened this way?”

“What do you mean?” I responded.

“Well, no one besides God was there in the beginning, so how can we be sure it happened like the Bible says?” Not a bad question from a second grader. I told her to ask Rev. Davis!

In dealing with the creation stories, I don’t think we can overemphasize that we are dealing with religious questions, not scientific questions. These are two different ways of describing reality. The two should not be confused. Genesis is not a scientific account of creation, and should not be so interpreted. It deals with, “Why?” and its answer is “God.” Modern science looks at the world and asks, “How?” and its answer is that the world slowly evolved—an answer that in no sense undermines belief in God.

Listen to four statements:

1. $2 + 2 = 4$.
2. I love you.
3. Babe Ruth hit 619 homeruns in his Major League career.
4. I love you, too.

It should be clear that statements one and three are different from statements two and four. One and three are factually verifiable: "You can look them up." Statements two and four cannot be "proved" in the same way; but, they can be much "truer" for the meaningful living of life than any number of so-called "factual" statements.

Since it is important, let's look at this another way. In Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It*, we are told that there are "...tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones." The speaker is saying that there are lessons to be learned from the woods. The metaphors help to underline the truth of his statement. But, the statement is obviously not "true" as an actual literal set of facts.

A factually minded proofreader might change Shakespeare's "...tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones" to "trunks in trees, stones in the running brooks, sermons in books." These statements would be factually true, but quite unimportant. Shakespeare's statement is a valuable description of the woods, while the proofreader's statement is pointless, even though scientifically accurate.

Returning to the creation stories, the point is not the number of hours in a day or that the world was created in 6 days. The important thing is that "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth..." The Genesis stories are the product of religious devotion meditating on the significance of the Creation, and pointing out its inescapable religious truth.

Back to our second grader's question, "How do we know it happened that way?" We don't. No one was an "on-the-scene reporter." In fact, most scholars believe that the text was written in the sixth century B.C. It was addressed to the Jews in exile in Babylon. The text is not an abstract statement about the origin of the universe. Rather, it is a theological and pastoral statement addressed to a real historical problem.

That "real problem" was to find a ground for faith in the God, Yahweh, when the experience of sixth century Babylon seems to deny the rule of God. To despairing exiles, it is declared that the God of Israel is the Lord of all of life. Yahweh is still God, one who watches over creation and will bring it to well being.

While in her 50s, my aunt lost her husband when he had a heart attack. The death and

grief were bad enough, but after about 6 months, she noticed a new phenomenon. When the neighborhood had a party, she was no longer included. When another couple, with whom she and her husband had attended the Philadelphia Orchestra for several years, went to renew their subscription, she wasn't included. Was she being shut out by her old friends because of her new marital status: widowed? She wasn't sure. She was sure of one thing: she was lonely. When she needed her friends the most, they weren't there.

In the face of loneliness like this, or when exiled in Babylon, or in the face of poverty, or unemployment, the creation story wants to affirm that God is still in control. God is the source of the world, and if God created the world, God will have the final say. Life has meaning and a purpose.

The substance and proclamation of the text we read today is that between creator and creature there is closeness and distance. The closeness of the two parties concerns God's abiding attentiveness to God's creation day by day.

Yet in the very closeness of trust, there is a distance which allows the creation its own freedom of action. The creation is not overpowered by the creator. The creator not only cherishes her creation, but he also honors and respects it.

The closeness affirms that creator and creation must come to terms with each other. But, at the same time, the two stand distinct from each other. Each has its own way in the relationship. The one will not be nullified by the other. The grace of God is that the creature whom God has caused to be, God now lets be.

We are inclined to shift the dialectic either to the extreme closeness that is expressed as coercive or smothering control: "The Lord wants me to do this...." "God told me that we should...." "The Lord is telling me...."

Or, on the other hand, the extreme distance that is expressed as indifference and autonomy: "God helps those who help themselves." "I'm in control here." "I'm captain of my own ship."

How do we walk the line between those extremes of close intimacy and distant aloofness? It's not an easy question to answer.

Perhaps you recall that section of *The Wind in the Willows* when Rat and Mole were looking for Portly, a baby otter who had gotten lost. They were transfixed by the unearthly music of the "pipe at the gates of dawn," the animal's god Pan. They made their way toward the source of the music.

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy, but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near.

Finally the Mole dared to look up, and found himself in the presence of “the Friend and Helper,” with whom, safe and content, was the baby otter.

“Rat!” he found breath in whisper, shaking. “Are you afraid?”

“Afraid?” murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. “Afraid! Him? O, never, never! And yet, and yet—O Mole, I am afraid.”

A small Indian boy on a reservation in southern Oklahoma rushes into the small cottage home of his favorite person—the person that he loves more than anybody else in the world—the person with whom he’s the most intimate—the person to whom he can run up and grab anywhere, anytime and hug and express love. He rushes into her little house to get some jam and bread. It’s late afternoon; in fact, it’s dark. He rushes in. She’s not in the kitchen. He rushes into the one other room and he sees her there, but he stops in the doorway. Her body is in a strange shape leaning, kneeling, bowing? What is this? Motionless except for her arms moving in a churn. She’s talking—the strange language of the Kiowa. She hesitates over the syllables of sorrow of her prayer. Her body casts strange silhouettes from the oil lamp against the walls and the little boy stops. He doesn’t rush in. In fact he says, “I have no right to be here.”

What distance! What intimacy!

Let us pray...

Our parent in heaven, surely you are in this place. We have no right to be here, but we have heard your invitation to draw near to you because you have drawn near to us. We would not be seeking you if you had not created us and continue to reach out to us.

May you be with us everywhere we go in the scattering of this day. May we feel you with us closer than breathing and know you more distant than the stars, and may every place we stand become Beth-el—the house of God. Amen.