

First Sunday after Pentecost, June 11, 2017

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

Fostering Day By Day Creativity

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Responsive Reading of the Scripture

(with the assistance of Lindsey and Teagan Piper, their parents, and Rev. Bob Brown)

Liturgist: In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was vast emptiness, without shape or form, and a chaotic darkness covered everything! The Spirit of God moved and hovered over these deep waters like a brooding dove over her nest. Then God said, "Let there be light!" There was light, and God separated it from the darkness – Day and Night.

Congregation (as the children hold up the signs): Day One. Good!

Liturgist: Then God separated the upper waters from the lower, drawing a line between the top and the bottom, the sky from below.

Congregation (as the children hold up the signs): Day Two. Good!

Liturgist: Next, God said, "Let the dry land under the sky appear, and it did. God called it "earth." Then the waters collected together into the oceans. After this, God called for vegetation and green things to grow: plants, fruit trees, grass, seeds bearing leaves and flowers.

Congregation (as the children hold up the signs): Day Three. Good!

Liturgist: God turned to the sky and called for there to be a big light for the day and a smaller light for the night – the Sun and the Moon – plus the twinkling stars.

Congregation (as the children hold up the signs): Day Four. Good!

Liturgist: God then created swarms of living creatures: birds to fly across the sky above the earth and all sorts of fish to swim in the seas, even sea monsters! God blessed them: "Be fruitful and multiply!"

Congregation (as the children hold up the signs): Day Five. Good!

Liturgist: Following all this creative activity, God went further: “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cows, caterpillars, and cougars, wild animals and creeping things. It was good! Then God said, “Let’s make human beings in our likeness and image. God blessed them: “Be fruitful and multiply! Also, it is your responsibility to care for all the rest of these beings and all this beauty with reverence.” God stood back and looked over all that he had made with a loving gaze.

Congregation (as the children hold up the signs): Day Six. Very Good!

Liturgist: Thus the heavens and earth and all their abundance was complete. God finished creation and sighed with deep satisfaction, able to rest from all the work that he had done.

Congregation (as the children hold up the signs and Bob feigns sleep): Shhhhh!

Liturgist: God blessed the seventh day and made it sacred.

Congregation (as the children hold up the signs): Day Seven. Holy!

(scripture paraphrase - Jean Vandergrift)

SERMON:

Since I attended Seattle University for a continuing education course years ago, I receive alumnae updates. I was interested to read that the school has recently established an Innovation Lab in connection with its College of Science and Engineering. It’s a collaborative studio space full of specialized equipment such as a laser cutter, a 3D printer, and Lego-like circuit elements called “little Bits” that people can snap together to produce and alter light and sound. Students are encouraged to “play” in the lab on self-directed learning projects, alongside the formal curriculum, in the hopes that this fosters creativity for the real world.

Creativity is considered a valuable commodity in our culture today! A quick Google search brings up entries on the subject in the hundreds of *millions*, and on Amazon, hundreds of *thousands* of books and products. Many minds it seems are being put to use toward the goal. One can read about creativity from disciplines as varied as psychology, math, the arts, and business. There’s even been a study done on the brains of jazz musicians!¹

Apparently, we want our citizens, our leaders, and our children to be creative. We want our nation and its institutions, including our churches, to be creative. For example, It’s my honor to be coordinating one of the “learning tracks” at my denomination’s General Assembly mid-July. This course is on “Transformative Leadership and Innovation.”

¹Charles J. Limb and Allen R. Braun, “Neural Substrates of Spontaneous Musical Performance: An MRI Study of Jazz

Our pervasive interest in creativity may be arising from the collective sense that as a society we've gotten "stuck" and face intractable problems. We feel this even more keenly when we are polarized, unable to agree on "the good" much less to work together toward it, and when the systems and structures we have put into place don't seem to be facilitating creativity, rather holding us captive to the status quo.

Besides being creative, as a society we desire to be *productive*. So we want people to be creative day in and day out. If it were possible, some of our employers would have us be innovative not just six, or seven, but *eight* days a week as the Beatles sang!

When we turn to the scripture, it certainly shows a productive and creative God! The story of creation in Genesis 1 is a litany of how much God accomplished from morning to evening on six consecutive days. Day after day something brand new, beautiful, and good appeared. Even when we take the word "day" metaphorically and poetically, as well we should, it is clear that the writers wanted to get across abundance!

And isn't creativity part of the "image" of God with which we humans were blessed on the sixth day? A part of who *we* are?

One of the churches I served believed this. It had an adult education class called "Creation Continues." Participants grew in faith by doing art, poetry, and music. The guiding ideas were that God hadn't stopped creating after Day Six *and* God's creativity flows through *us*.

Even so, there seems to be something frenetic, if not unhealthy about *our* desire for so much creativity-on-demand. When we humans attach greed and speed to creativity, we can actually block it!

In our desire to be creative *and* productive like God, we overlook something in the Genesis 1 creation story – something precious and important. We tend to skip over verses one and two: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 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."

We don't know how long it lasted, but before creating the light of Day One, there was a period during which God hovered over the pre-existing matter. The word translated "wind" here, as I think you are aware from Bob's sermons and last Sunday's Pentecost story, is "Ruach," also meaning "breath" and "spirit." The Ruach Elohim – the Spirit of the Lord – was brooding over the unformed and the unknown, like a Jackson Pollock over a waiting canvas.

One of my professors of preaching taught us to value "brooding time," as he called it, before writing our sermons: that our preparation ought not only be in questions and commentaries, but in pondering and waiting upon the Spirit, and letting ideas coalesce in us. The concept of brooding also invokes the image of the Spirit like a bird over her nest. In other words, before new life can be born, it needs some womb time in the rich, warm, dark of the real and not yet! The Hebrew words for this matter are "tohu wabohu," the raw material of real life from which God creates.

The theological point is that creativity occurs after spiritual brooding upon the real things of life.

This idea is made even more tangible and poignant when we learn that this creation story was oral history for ages. It wasn't written down until the 6th century BC when Israel was in Exile, captive in Babylon, far removed from the land of Promise and its destroyed capitol, Jerusalem. It was *then* that this creation story was remembered, written on scrolls, and reenacted in worship –

then, when it was most needed, when the people of God were in confused spiritual darkness. It helped them to believe in a bigger God, one to whom they could be connected no matter where they were, *and* to believe in the ability – theirs and God’s – to create out of this *tohu wabohu* - messy real life - something new, good, and beautiful!

So creativity is not just the way *God is*, or even the image of God *in us*, but *how God works with us*. Verses one and two remind us that God waits upon and readies us, shapes our gifts and our life together over time, saying a “transformative word”² that brings into being solutions and situations that we cannot imagine on our own alone! **And if *you and I* want to be creative, our children, our leaders, and our nation to be creative, then as the *church* we also surely need to value brooding time in the Spirit!**

Just a few days ago, I watched little children making fun out of nothing much; they were running up a grassy hill in the park, lying down at the top and rolling down horizontally, over and over again, in unstructured play. They were fostering creativity. Julia Cameron encourages would-be writers to write stream of consciousness “morning papers” first thing every day to foster creativity. This summer, our Evolve process is inviting you to adopt spiritual practices. It’s a season of reflection – brooding in the Holy Spirit – from which God’s creative call for the future is more likely to emerge!

²Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 26.