

BEGINNINGS
Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31
Genesis 11:1-9

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on May 31, 2020, the Day of Pentecost, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31

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.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

...

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.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 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.”

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. 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.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

I.

Nearly every year I have served at Westminster I have preached a summer sermon series for 8-10 Sundays. While I have gone back and forth about the feasibility of such a plan this summer, I remembered that Biblical texts have a mind of their own, they will speak to the human situation in which we find ourselves, no matter what particular text or series of texts I choose. Thus I am going to proceed with a series on the Book of Genesis, and trust that the texts scheduled are as conscious and vocal about the Coronavirus situation as the texts the four of us have chosen as we have preached these twelve weeks.

The series is entitled simply “Beginnings”; and we begin today in the logical place – “In the Beginning.”

Let us pray: Follow, O Lord, the preaching of this Word with the gift and guidance of your Spirit, that insofar as it is true, it will be written indelibly on our hearts, and insofar as it is false it will be quickly forgotten and do no harm. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

From the time I was a college student, I have believed that the first eleven chapters of Genesis were written by thoughtful and imaginative people, inspired by God, to depict through poem and saga the way the world *is* in relation to God’s *intention* and *hope* for earth and for us who walk its surfaces and sail its seas during the years of our earthly life.

In teaching the first eleven chapters of Genesis, I typically say God created the human race, bestowed us with both *freedom* and *responsibility*, and that from our earliest days, in the exercise of both, we have tended to *exceed* or *overreach* the bounds God has set for our us as creatures.

- Genesis presents the motivations of the woman’s reach for the fruit and her sharing it with the man who equally partook: that the fruit was good for food, a delight to the eyes, and desired to make one wise.¹
- Nourishment, beauty, and wisdom are not evil in and of themselves, but the narrative presents them as residing in the tree the knowledge of good and evil which God has reserved for God’s own domain.
- Genesis is wise to portray that there are simply some things that lie beyond our capacity to know.

Genesis then presents a series of consequences that follow from the Fall and depict human life *as we know it*, including:

- Division between male and female²
- Division between humanity and nature³
- Division between artisans, manufacturers, and agricultural workers⁴
- Pain in childbirth⁵
- Difficulty of human labor and work⁶
- Shame over nakedness⁷

¹ Genesis 3:6.

² Genesis 3:12.

³ Genesis 3:13-14.

⁴ Genesis 4:20-22.

⁵ Genesis 3:16

⁶ Genesis 3:17-19.

⁷ Genesis 3:7.

- Subjection of women⁸
- Sexual abuse across generations⁹
- Slavery and racism¹⁰
- And coming out of the Tower of Babel, the division of the world into different nations in different localities speaking different languages and not understanding one another.¹¹

I have often said that the world as God created it is one of beauty and harmony, but we live “after the Fall,” and it is that fallen state into which Christ has come as God’s own Son to redeem us. As believers in Christ’s ultimate redemption, we await and live toward “a new heaven and a new earth”¹² that Christ alone will bring.

In this reading of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the *differences* we experience as human beings – which seem so ever more challenging and violent this week – grow out of the *Fall* and form part of that from which God promises to redeem us.

II.

But a closer guided reading of these chapters in recent years has led me to see that in addition to difference developing *after the Fall*, difference is also built into our *original creation*. I continue to believe that our lives are marked by tragic consequences of the Fall, particularly human conflict and division; but I have also come to see that difference, multiplicity, even the much-used word “diversity” is built much more deeply into God’s created order than my older view had noticed.

Follow me along here:

- In the Creation story in Genesis 1, the Hebrew word we translate as “separation” (*Havdalah*) is used five times¹³:
 - God *separates* light from darkness
 - God *separates* the waters that are under the dome from the waters above
 - God *separates* day from night.
- In addition, when God creates humankind, God creates us both *singular* and *plural*, *individual* and *member of a community*, based on a mysterious plurality *within God’s very being*:
 - “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image,” God intones, “after *our* likeness”
 - Then: “God created humankind in *his* image” (singular), followed immediately by “in the image of God he created *them* (plural), male and female he created *them*.”

⁸ Genesis 3:16.

⁹ Genesis 9:20-23.

¹⁰ Genesis 9:24-27.

¹¹ Genesis 11:1-9,

¹² Revelation 21:1.

¹³ Genesis 1:3, 6, 7, 14, 18.

- And finally, God gives this singular-yet-plural, plural-yet-singular human creature *dual* and potentially *conflicting* roles:
 - “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” [God says] – an image of humanity standing *alone* and *above* all that has been created
 - Yet followed by “Be fruitful and *multiply*, fill the earth and subdue it,” – an image of scattering across the earth, multiplying, becoming numerous and varied, living among all the creatures of the earth.

As literary scholar Avivah Zornberg points out, God creates us to *stand above* all other creatures and exercise *dominion over them* and at the same time to *scatter* and *multiply like all* other creatures. We are both *detached* and *above* our fellow creatures, but also subject to “the in the immediate, the experienced, and the contingent” as they are. Zornberg adds: This opens “new possibilities” for humankind, but also “new hazards.”¹⁴

At the end of these eleven chapters, we come full circle, as humankind, “seeks to build a tower with its top in the heavens...so as to avoid being scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.” In other words, we seek detachment, dominion, above-ness: one people, one language. But God rejects this instinct, comes down from heaven, “confuses [our] language” and “scatters [us] abroad...over the face of all the earth.”

Thus, with the Tower of Babel, the multiplicity – “diversity” – of the human race is depicted as sufficiently built into the earliest intentions of God that the desire to escape it leads to its imposition at God’s hands. In both our having been *created* by God and our having “*fallen*” of our own accord, we are a people destined for *difference*, *multiplicity*, and *scatteredness*.

“New possibilities, new hazards.”

III.

Friday morning I conducted the only funeral I have conducted since the shutdown began three months ago. It was for a man a few years older than me named Steve Carrig, who with his wife Marjorie Phillips and daughter Patricia have been a part of Westminster for many years. Steve himself never joined the church, though he has been a bright, beloved, curmudgeonly, and skeptical student in the Old and New Testament classes I have taught.

It so happens that Steve and Marjorie had bought a townhouse many years ago adjacent to Columbia Gardens Cemetery in Arlington, and when he died after a yearlong battle with cancer, Marjorie bought a plot for his ashes within sight of their front door. There were less than ten family members at the graveside service, all masked and socially distant, and about twenty neighbors in front of their home observing the service from over the fence, again, masked, and distant. There was a reception in the driveway following the service, with food pre-wrapped and participants again masked and socially distant. It is the first time I have attended a reception or conducted a funeral without touching another human being.

¹⁴ Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 3-13.

Nearly everyone present was a veteran of Army Counterterrorism, in which Steve had served for a decade, or the State Department or Foreign Service, in which Steve and Marjorie both served. Most were my age or older. Most had lived around the world, several were born in other countries, a few were in marriages of mixed-race, mixed-religion, or mixed national origin. Driving through the small cemetery to the gravesite, I had noticed a variety of names on headstones with eastern European, Italian, Greek, or Middle Eastern spellings. The service, the guests, the friends, the colleagues, the reception, the food, the names on the gravestones all reflected the *multiplicity* of the human race we have inherited from Creation and Fall and Tower of Babel. The more things have changed since Creation, the more they have stayed the same. New possibilities, new hazards.

IV.

Like many of you, over the last decade or so, I have watched, experienced, lived in this city as our country has become more divided. And like several of you of my generation, I have said at times to myself and others: “It is still not as bad as 1968. We have not had assassinations. We have not had cities burning.”

But now we have had the latter. And summer hasn’t even started yet. And the support the government has provided the millions out of work has not yet ended. And political campaigns – in whatever form they will take – have not yet reached their full volume and rancor.

Every time a black man or woman is killed by a police officer, every time a camera catches all or part of the exchange, every time video seems powerful enough to expose and inflame but not powerful enough to convict or exonerate, every time someone commissioned by society with the honor of maintaining order appears to forget the part of the honor and commission to use deadly force only as a last resort, every time protest against injustice and racism turns to street violence and burning buildings, the historic and historically based distrust that many African-American citizens feel about law enforcement and criminal justice in our country seems no closer to being alleviated despite decades of effort and some seeming progress.

On this last day of May, the hazards of our multiplicity seem real; the possibilities, further and further away.

It makes me sad. Very sad.

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But part of our role as human beings created in the image of God is one of both *leading* and *living* in the world that God has created with multiplicity within it. We lack the luxury the builders of the Tower of Babel sought but could not achieve: “one language and the same words.” There is little if anything in Genesis that leads me to believe that God would even consider such uniformity a worthy goal. As the great rabbinic commentator Rashi wrote: God did not say “Let *Me* make humankind in *My* image,” but “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image.”¹⁵ The “us” and “our” – the multiplicity, the plurality – are here to stay. It is who we are. It is who God has created us to be.

¹⁵ Quoted in Zornberg, 5.

So let us learn to live with our differences creatively, joyfully, justly, peacefully, orderly, productively. Let us *be fruitful* and *multiply*. Let us *be scattered* across the face of the earth among its many languages and people; and – on this Day of Pentecost – let us learn to “hear, each of us, in our own native language.”¹⁶

Between new possibilities and new hazards, let us choose possibilities. It is the only real choice for those of us who believe that we and every human being are created “in God’s image,” redeemed by Jesus Christ, and gifted with the Holy Spirit among us.

Amen.

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¹⁶ Acts 2:8.