

The Journey: "In God's Image"

[Genesis 1:26-27, 2:4-7](#)

[John 3:1-7](#)

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Last week we portrayed the Creation as a painting, as a dance, and as a sculpture. When you read the story from the bible, it starts as poetry. Genesis 1 was written by an author we call the Priestly writer—or P for short. Genesis 2 is believed to have been written by a different author, the Yahwist writer—or J for short (because *Jahweh* in German is spelled with a J). The first writer is a poet, and the writing gives us a sense of God's transcendence. But the second writer uses prose and conveys God's immanence. In the first, God is far above in the heavens; in the second God is as close as a breath. So already, two pages into Genesis, we see that the bible came from different pieces of literature, and it was compiled over generations, and passed down to us as a collection of many kinds of writing.

Today in the first part of the Creation story when God creates humans, we hear God's words: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (1:26). And then as often in poetry, we hear repetition as the text continues: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27).

So what does it mean to say that God created humans in God's image? *Imago dei*, the image of God. This poet wants us to think of ourselves like God. We are created to be like God. God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (1:26). What's odd is the plural form God uses. All through the first creation story that we heard Diana read last week and saw our youth portray, God was singular until this verse. Upon creating humans, God becomes plural!

There are many explanations for this. It's been a puzzle for generations. One explanation is a very Christian interpretation: that the Trinity was present at the Creation. Another is very formal: that God created humans with the help of a host of angels and so modestly claims not to have done this great act alone. A third interpretation comes from the book, *The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us* by Bruce Feiler. Bruce Feiler will be here in our sanctuary for a talk April 4 on this book, which is only available for the public starting the last week of March. (I have an early copy.)

Feiler maintains that the Creation is all about "two." In fact, the whole bible is about duality: the relationship between God and humanity, and the relationship between person and person. There are two bible stories of humans being created. And God is plural! Feiler says the reason God becomes plural is that God needs both a man and a woman to populate the earth. In order to make both a male and a female in God's likeness, God has to become plural. And so the text says, "Let us make humankind in our image."

The word for Adam in Hebrew is *ha-adam*, which means "the human." All humankind is a reflection of God. All humankind is made in God's image. God contains both male and

female, and so does the first human. Some early Jewish and Gnostic Christian writing calls God androgynous (<http://www.dhushara.com/book/consum/gnos.htm>). This is interesting to contemplate in today's awareness of issues around gender identity. First God created an androgynous human, and then God divided that first human into two: male and female. It seems that our Creation story echoes the stories of gods and goddesses of ancient Mesopotamia. Instead of having many gods, our one God contains both genders. In the Mesopotamian stories, humans are an afterthought; whereas in the bible, the creation of humans takes center stage. In the Mesopotamian stories, the characters are kings and elites; whereas in the bible the people are ordinary folks, like Adam and Eve, and us (Feiler, 27-29).

In the second Creation story that starts in chapter two of Genesis, God creates a human being "out of the dust of the ground," in a garden. The J writer tells how God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." This second story is very down to earth—in the mud of rivers and gardens. God creates an every-day family, with Adam and Eve and their children. We receive life by God's breath!

Both of these Creation stories show the closeness between God and humanity—in God's image and out of God's breath! We could say we are "of God."

And that's what Jesus tries to tell Nicodemus. He needs to be "of God." Nicodemus is a Greek Jew of the temple establishment, a Pharisee. But he was in the dark—he came to Jesus "by night." When Jesus said he had to be "born from above," Nicodemus was clueless. "How can these things be?" he asked. I think Jesus wanted Nicodemus to know that he needed to be more like God—to function as if he were created in God's image, fashioned by God to be a man in relationship, caring about others. Perhaps Nicodemus was proud. He was "a teacher of Israel," but something must have been missing in his life, for he was curious about Jesus. He was a seeker.

Some of us are like Nicodemus, ministers and church leaders, especially. We think we know the answers—what beliefs are "right," and how a church ought to be run. But when we admit our own insecurities, we know how little we really know for sure, and we recognize in ourselves shortcomings—ways we could have been more generous, more understanding, more patient.....more God-like. If we are made in God's likeness, then what does it take to be more like God?

Jesus says that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus came from God because God so loved the world, the Creation. We too come from God because of God's great love for us. Our task is to live as if we are God's precious creation, in relationships where we treat one another preciously.

I remember a time during a tense political climate. It was during the Cold War, and I was a member of Asbury United Methodist Church. I was on the Administrative Board, and a group of protestors was coming out to demonstrate on Good Friday at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. They asked if they could spend the night in our church

Thursday night. Many people who work at the Lab attend church at Asbury; both the church and the Lab are on East Avenue. Our minister explained the request at our Board meeting and asked if we might pray and then go around the room and each person express his or her opinion about the protestors spending the night before we took a vote. He said he would honor the vote, however it ended up. We did that; we prayed and calmly, respectfully each person spoke. And by the time we got around the table, it was clear, the vote was unanimous, to let the demonstrators sleep in our church. We invited them to attend the Holy Thursday foot-washing service, and they did. People who were involved in designing nuclear weapons washed the feet of people opposed to nuclear arms. It was an evening I'll never forget. We treated one another preciously that night.

Another minister tells of how after the Vietnam War his congregation sponsored a refugee family from Laos. It started as one family, and it grew to include 22 individuals, all living in the small rural community where the church was located. One man in the church—we'll call him Don—didn't think "those Laotians" belonged in America. He wasn't happy with the church's refugee program. The Laotian family attended the church and some of the members kept their distance from them. It was communion Sunday, and it was the church's practice to come down front and kneel at the communion railing. The pastor would start the bread and the cup on one end of the railing, and then the people at the railing would offer the elements to the person next to them. The minister could see that the way the people were filing forward would put Don next to the Laotian family. They knelt. The pastor started the bread down the line. Don received the bread, and then turned to face the Laotian man next to him. Everyone was listening; you could hear a pin drop. Don said, "This is my body given for you" (*Abingdon Preaching Annual 2008*, ed. David N. Mosser, 54-55). It was a moment of rebirth. It was a moment when everyone there knew in their hearts that they were all created in God's image. They could see that God breathed life into each of them and asked each of them to live abundantly.

Nicodemus comes back into the Gospel story two more times, to advocate for Jesus and to bury him. Whereas he first came to Jesus in the dark, later he takes the body of Jesus down from the cross in the light of day. He is no longer ashamed or fearful of what others might say. He has been reborn in God's spirit.

Grace comes to us from God, and our response is to love with all our heart, mind and soul. It isn't a cheap grace, one that we take for granted or try to earn by token deeds. It is a costly grace that requires rebirth and regular acknowledgement of God's presence in our lives.

"God did not send [Jesus] into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). We are saved—we are able to receive eternal life—when we live as if we are created in God's likeness, and cultivate relationships worthy of that likeness. We are to treat one another preciously, as God treats us because we are made in God's image, and we have the capacity to be holy. Heaven help us.