

Getting creative with the creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4a)

## It all starts with poetry.

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Genesis 1 richly repays reflection.

- Consider it not just a creation account, but an accounting of the community of creation, of the bringing forth of community by community. The triune God, capable of the reflexive “let us,” permits there to be that which can image triune life. And if such imaging is properly the work of humankind, humbly obedient (like the incarnate Word) and blessedly fecund (like the vivifying Spirit), there may be—in the total community of creation—an improper imaging as well.
- It all starts with poetry, [as Debra Dean Murphy reminds us](#). This matters profoundly, because it speaks to the power of words and language in Genesis 1. If you preach this text, do it with words that are worthy of this particular poetry that makes something out of nothing, that evokes hearers from the silence, that summons an audience from an absence.
- But don't turn to “The Creation” by James Weldon Johnson, or rather turn there but don't stand on its third line (in God's voice: “I'm lonely”). For not even poetic license—which Johnson deserves every bit as much as P (if you happen to parse the Pentateuch like that) or a preacher—can cover the claim that God creates to compensate for isolation and lack. “I'm lonely” is Satan's plight but

never God's. The triune fiat that, in the idiom of Gerard Manley Hopkins, "fathers-forth" absolutely everything is one that arises from abundance, community, love. Johnson's poem is a powerful rendition of the power of Genesis 1, what with all the flinging, spangling, hurling, bulging, spitting, batting, and clapping. Equally potent is the turn to intimacy, to cooling, cuddling, smiling, and finally the Genesis 2 immanence of bending, kneeling, toiling, shaping, and blowing.

- Consider appropriately dynamic equivalencies to "it was good." For example, the Eastern church has long known that what God saw was beautiful. (They translated *tov* as *kalos*.) Thus we don't have to wait for Genesis 3 to find beauty misapprehended by serpentine logic. Genesis 1 already suggests that recognizing and rejoicing in beauty is God's way with the world. Which could make it easier to invite congregants into considering how consumptive patterns of living are uglifying the planet at an alarming rate. There will still be work for the preacher to do, inasmuch as we've been habituated to perceive the ecologically harmful as the aesthetically beautiful.
- Another dynamic equivalence: every time the text reads "and God saw that it was good," substitute "and God relished, 'mmm that's good!'" To get that final exclamation right you should probably go on and add, "mmm, mmm, that's mighty good!" Like a cook preparing a feast, God tastes along the way, but the whole is greater—indeed, tastier—than the sum of its parts.
- Find Thomas Troeger's hymn "God marked a line and told the sea." Meditate on its wonderful affirmation of the goodness of limits, the grace of finitude. Genesis 1 tells us that we are creatures and that our true freedom lies within, not beyond, our limitedness. Learning to love our limitations isn't a popular pedagogy, but this catechesis of creatureliness is precisely the path to contentment, even to joy.
- A recent online meme consisted of following a famous first line with the sentence, "And then the murders began." Of course, in a sense that's the structural work done by Genesis 4, not Genesis 1:3. But playfully inserting it right after "In the beginning..." can help us to see—by way of contrast—just how harmonious, tranquil, and nonviolent is this creation account. No animals

were harmed in the making of this movie. The body count was zero. Now, that vision doesn't fully square with the reality of nature red in tooth and claw. But it is a reminder that we are created from God's peace and for the gift of participation in eternal peace.