

June 4, Trinity A (Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8)

## **Trusting in God's transcendence means acknowledging God's otherness.**

by [Ron Ruthruff](#) in the [June 2023](#) issue

The book of Genesis is a wide, sweeping narrative. In it we see the origin of all things, God creating the universe. The origin of a people, God calling Abraham. Genesis concludes with the story of Joseph's rise to power in Egypt. What man intends for evil God uses for good.

This week's texts reflect the power of the Divine and its purpose for humankind. Psalm 8 catalogs God's creative power and the relationship God desires with humans. The creation story in Genesis explores the meaning of the created order—and introduces the transcendent nature of God.

*Transcendence* is a theological term, a 25-cent word that simply means the existence beyond what is perceived as normal or human. God is other, and this idea of transcendence is a major theme in our Genesis text. The Divine is different from us humans. God says, "Let there be light," and there is light—God's word is creative action. God has the ability to produce light, life, land, and sea with nothing but word. My words do not make things happen—I tell my kids to pick up their socks, and nothing happens. I am a limited human being.

This concept of transcendence or otherness is challenging for those of us who grew up in the shadow of the Enlightenment and the corresponding advances in scientific discovery. We are thinkers, shaped by René Descartes and his contemporaries. Thinking, knowing, and certainty were the cornerstones of Western thought that made sense of the world. We can know, and knowing reflects our identity. Transcendence sits in contrast to this kind of knowing.

Enlightenment thought tells us what we know, which is a very good thing, but it says little about what we do not know. I don't think we can get to the heart of this Genesis text through definitive doctrines or proof-filled apologetics; both are too

invested in modernity. In the end, they construct a concept of God that, as Karl Barth said, is nothing more than man speaking loudly.

So how do we hear this story today, without so easily submitting to literal interpretations that fit God into a comprehensible box? The composition of this text predates any of the modern categories people try to use to understand it as a literal retelling of the creation of the world. How do we, in the world that you and I live in, embrace the mystery of this story that God is other, not like us? How do we read it in a way that builds our faith and helps us avoid the way of thinking that seeks certainty and control?

The Netflix miniseries *Midnight Mass* tells the story of a poor, remote community in which a young, charismatic priest is energizing his parish through a progression of miraculous acts. The priest has the power of a miracle worker. While some follow with unquestioned abandon, others—such as the story’s prodigal son, who returns home after a stretch in prison—seem more skeptical. Spoiler alert: the priest is a vampire. His deal with the dark angel has brought him eternal life, the power to do the miraculous and to end some of the suffering in the community.

The series touches on themes of good and evil, power and control, immortality and finitude. What does it mean to be a finite, limited human being amid the chaos of life? A vampire chooses eternity and immortality over their humanity. Others chose to live within the limitations of finitude, the greatest of which is death.

If we are to step into the mystery of transcendence, we need the wisdom of the Serenity Prayer. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote this famous prayer as part of a 1926 sermon; years later it was adopted in shorter form by Alcoholics Anonymous. Acceptance and serenity sit in deep contrast to knowing and certainty. Acceptance and serenity embrace the limitations of being human and rely on the otherness of God.

Transcendence simply means God is other. The question is, can we suspend our need for control long enough to trust in that mystery? To believe that God is other than us but also other for our sake? This is the journey of faith beyond certainty. It means believing in a divine power greater than ourselves that, from the very beginning, has created with good intentions. God orchestrates a world where God holds what humans cannot.

I trust in this mystery that reminds me that I am more than what I think, but I am not God. I can't control it or contain it, but I trust it.