

In the Beginning...

Sermon for December 25, 2019
Christmas Day
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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:1

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

In the beginning was the word.

Always we are fascinated with beginnings: we want to know how it all began, how the world began, and where we come from. We are curious about our ancestors. We search our family tree - my father was able to trace back his family tree for several hundred years! But even with the greatest search, our beginnings are always shrouded in mystery. And so we always search for answers.

The Bible gives us two creation stories, one is very poetic (Genesis 1) and one very earthy (Genesis 2).

The poetic one speaks of seven days in which chaos was transformed into order; sky and water and land were separated and defined, and then each were filled with creatures: the sky with birds, the water with fish, the land with plants and animals and humans.

The other story, the earthy one, tells how barren land was refreshed by rain so that a garden could be planted, the Garden of Eden. Adam, whose name means "Earthling", was created from the earth, and he was ordered to take care of the garden. And when the earthling was lonely, other creatures were formed from the earth, animals great and small. They were given to Adam as companions, but none was a perfect mate. And at last, Eve, the mother of all living things, was created.

Generation after generation of people have looked to these foundational creation stories to satisfy their need to know our beginnings.

Science has also provided answers. And in every age, science has expanded its answers. Now science tells us that several billion years ago our Solar System was nothing but a cloud of cold dust particles swirling through empty space. And then, in a series of fiery explosions and contractions the sun was formed and then the planets that we know today as Earth, Mars, Venus, Mercury, and the outer planets. And then life emerged. Through adaptation and natural selection, life evolved into

many species, until at last human beings walked on the earth.

There was a time when these different answers were made to compete with each other. Religion became the enemy of science and science became the enemy of religion. But now many people have come to see that this is an unnecessary and needless conflict; science and religion can walk hand in hand, one describing the physical world, the other the spiritual world.

But I believe in another beginning. I believe that in the beginning there was love, the love of God. This love is the reason for all things, and all things came into being because of this love.

The whole point of creating the world was so that God could love the world. And yes, I believe in evolution. Why not? I believe that through evolution God brought forth all that we know as our world, and all living things. And the whole point of bringing forth these living things was so that God could love them. And the whole point of bringing forth humanity was so that God could love humanity, and so that humanity might love God.

God has given us eyes to see, and ears to hear and the ability to appreciate beauty. We are mesmerized by a sunset, intrigued by the scent of a rose, delighted by the song of the birds. Holding a newborn child in our arms. We fall in love with the beauty of creation and in the end with the creator himself.

Perhaps you had such a moment, a moment of such great beauty that you fell in love with life itself.

God's love is everywhere and in all things. It pours itself out with abandon. It is fiery one moment and soothing the next moment. And it will forever seek us out, look for us, look for our love. At the same time we look for this love also, because we are created in this way, we were created for love we were created to look for love.

But sometimes we look for love in all the wrong places. Other times we come close to love and we shrink back, because it seems too much. We do not dare to believe that is it real, and it is for us, that we are really, and truly loved.

There is a beautiful description of this disconnection in the Confessions of St. Augustine:

*Late have I loved you,
O Beauty ever ancient, ever new,
late have I loved you!
You were within me, but I was outside,
and it was there that I searched for you.
In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created.
You were with me, but I was not with you.*

*Created things kept me from you;
yet if they had not been in you
they would not have been at all.
You called, you shouted,
and you broke through my deafness.
You flashed, you shone,
and you dispelled my blindness.
You breathed your fragrance on me;
I drew in breath and now I pant for you.
I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more.
You touched me, and I burned for your peace.*

St. Augustine wrote these words more than 1600 years ago. But this same experience - “you called, you shouted, you broke through my deafness” - has been the experience of many people in many places of every time and age.

Take for example the story of the Poet Christian Wiman. Christian Wiman was raised in a very religious household, but for most of his life he did not attend go to church. And then three events happened that totally reshaped his life. The first event was a severe case of writer's block. The poet found himself exhausted on a very deep level, and the words just stopped coming. He felt like his ability to write poetry had been taken away from him. It was a very crushing experience.

Then the second event occurred: In the mist of all this bleakness he fell in love; it was a great, deep love and he got married. And with this falling in love came a deep and overflowing joy. It was a profound and almost spiritual experience.

And then, in the midst of this great joy, he received a medical diagnosis. Out of the blue he learned that there was an incurable cancer in his blood. The couple had been married less than a year. They cried a lot. They mourned, not only because the poet's life was about to come to an end, and now they future they had imagined together was snatched away from them.

Then one morning they found themselves going to church. This time his experience was different. The poet describes his experience in these words, and now I quote from one of his essays:

I was brought up with the poisonous notion that you had to renounce love of the Earth in order to receive the love of God. My experience has been just the opposite: a love of the Earth and existence so overflowing that it implied, or included, or even absolutely demanded, God.

Love did not deliver me from the Earth, but into it. And by some miracle I do not find that this experience is crushed or even lessened by the knowledge that, in all likelihood, I will be leaving the Earth sooner than I had thought. Quite the contrary, I find life thriving in me, ... for what extreme grief has given me is the very thing it seemed at first to obliterate: a sense of life beyond the moment, a sense of hope.

So now I bow my head and try to pray in the mornings, not because I don't doubt the reality of what I have experienced, but because I do, and with an intensity that, because to once feel the presence of God is to feel his absence all the more acutely...

Quoted from:

<https://www.reckonings.net/reckonings/2017/05/christian-wiman-love-bade-me-welcome.html>

And now, a final quote from St. Augustine:

*Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise;
your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning.
And so we [humans], who are a due part of your creation,
long to praise you...*

*You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy,
because you have made us and drawn us to yourself,
and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*

Amen.