

“God’s Queer Creation”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Pride Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; June 16, 2019

Genesis 1:1-2:3

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.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

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.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

As some of you know, I'm a fan of biblical cartoons. One of my favorites for this scene is a white-bearded man in a flowing robe standing in a laundromat, whistling at work. There's a basket of clothes in the foreground, and a washing machine in the background with its lid open. The figure throws white socks into the washing machine, while other colors lay on the counter nearby. The caption: "And God separated the light from the dark..."

But think of the last time you tried to separate lights from darks in the wash—was it really so easy to tell which things go where? Unless you are doing laundry for a hospital or somewhere else with great quantities of the same kind of linens, you have to make judgment calls about what goes where. We do only two loads of laundry a week in my household, so all the bright clothes have to be split somehow between blacks and whites. I make rather arbitrary determinations, so the loads end up being *lightish* (whites, yellows, pale greens, lighter tans) and *darkish* (blues, browns, blacks and rich purples). It's an imprecise system when you have to divide a rainbow of colors into only two loads of laundry. But it matters to do this with care, because if you place something in a load that is unfit, it bleeds.

When *God* separated the light from the dark, was it as complicated then too? I didn't used to think about it so much—the Genesis text here seems to make it all neat and plain. Again and again, God creates what seem to be clear categories over and against each other. There's light and dark; sky above, sea below and dry land in the middle. There is sun and moon, bird and fish, plant and animal, then humanity—male and female. Creation appears to be this ordered balance of complementary opposites, and that's just what the writer intended. Textual scholars who study the original Hebrew here and elsewhere in Genesis see clues that this account of creation was likely written by Hebrew priests who benefited from (and thus communicated) a hierarchically arranged universe. What we have heard and shared in ourselves is a beautifully ordered, liturgical recitation of how things came to be. But we fall short of appreciating God's *whole* creation if we think that only such binaries and complementary-opposite forms were created. Did God *actually* separate light from dark, sea from sky, and male from female? Or is it a bit messier when we try to categorize things, like doing the laundry?

Biblical scholar and transgender leader Austen Hartke, a friend who lives here in the Twin Cities, has recently published a book about the Bible and transgender Christians. He points out that "the world isn't separated distinctly into land or sea; there are also marshes, estuaries, and coral reefs."¹ Water takes on solid-land characteristics when it's cold enough to form ice. What about water vapor—does fog count as part of the sea, the sky, neither or both? Likewise, people don't always fall exclusively into male or female categories. Something like one in a hundred people are born intersex, which means with indeterminate biological characteristics, or with sex organs of both males and females. Even if one's plumbing is distinct, one's interior gender identity (how I think of myself) and gender expression (how I live in the world) sometimes matches that biology and sometimes doesn't. Those of us who are what's called "cisgender"—where gender identity matches gender expression and plumbing—may still experience the disorientation caused by rigid categories when our sexual orientation is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and we are attracted to people of the same gender.

See how challenging it can be to categorize people as though *we* were laundry? Fortunately, there's room in the Bible for recognizing all of this diverse creation. When the Bible says that God creates male and female, Austen Hartke concludes, "this verse does not discredit other sexes or genders, any more

¹ Austen Hartke, "God's unclassified world" in *The Christian Century* magazine (April 25, 2018).

than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk, or the separation of land from sea rejects the existence of marshes and estuaries. ...Just as we call God the Alpha and the Omega, implying all things from first to last and in between, the author of Genesis 1 is using a poetic device to corral the infinite diversity of creation into categories we can easily understand.”

Seen in this light, the Genesis 1 description is poetic and beautiful, with God stopping often to pronounce creation “good”. But if we get too hung up on the categories, and which people belong in the male or female baskets, the preconceived ideas become idols that take on more importance than God’s brilliantly diverse and queer creation. Dominant systems start to assume that God-given reality must be forced into these systems. If there’s a foundational assumption is that there *are* no queer people, doctors, churches, marriage laws, and military institutions don’t know what to do with those who don’t fit binary assumptions. Since such a person doesn’t exist, the queer person must conform or go away. In the worst cases, queer people are like the bright laundry in an unfit place. Throughout history and to the present day, in our country and around the world, queer people bleed too.

This matters because I believe we’re all a little queer, a little unorthodox. We live in a soup of social assumptions about gender roles, good and evil, light and dark, etc. All those who don’t exactly match the stories and categories can find ourselves unfit, such as if we’re a man who cries, or a woman who doesn’t care to wear dresses. What in you is outside the customary lines, so queer that you think it must change for the sake of conformity? If we are inclined to hide away for shame any part of us, or feel we have to go away because we don’t belong, we too bleed.

Thanks be to God, though, for a creation story that makes room for the vast spectrum of humanity and the wider God-beloved, God-blessed queer world. We read this biblical story as Hartke does, with the binaries establishing the range of possibility and not limiting categories, so that ALL people might see ourselves within God’s creation, might know ourselves with the belovedness which God created and calls good, very good. No bleeding required, only pride. Amen!