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June 15, 2014
Psalm 8
Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

SAYING AND SEEING

Imagine what they saw that Christmas Eve forty five years ago. Those three astronauts on Apollo 8 were the first humans to orbit the moon. They looked down on its cratered surface and looked back at earth, seeing it from a perspective that no humans had seen before. They saw and then they spoke. On that Christmas Eve night, with the largest television audience up to that time watching a live grainy feed, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and William Anders showed pictures of the earth and moon. Lovell said, "The vast loneliness is awe-inspiring and it makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth." Relying on a space capsule named after the Greek god of light, they took turns reading the first part of today's passage from Genesis 1 about another God. They read the poetic first creation account in the Bible that is structured in describing what God said followed by what God saw. It was not Apollo, it was God who said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good." Over a structured description of six days of creation, the Genesis text follows what God says, what then happens out of the creative power of divine speech, then tells us that God saw what had been accomplished and then spoke again to label each aspect of creation 'good.' The crew concluded their powerful message saying, "We close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you - all of you on the good Earth." ¹

How vulnerable they must have felt, farther away from Earth than any humans have been before or since, hoping to make it back home to that blue marble hanging in the dark depths of space that they looked at through their window. That creation account, in that context, took on a special meaning for them, and for those of us who were watching and listening to it all in a safe and secure gathering with our families who were together to celebrate that the powerful and creative word of God had come in human form in the birth of Jesus.

When we hear that wonderful Genesis account that describes the beginning of it all, we don't often think about the context in which that account first came to be. Biblical scholars got a big assist in figuring out that original context when ancient tablets containing words of a different creation account, a Babylonian one, were discovered in the ruins of ancient Nineveh in the middle of the 19th century. This account, named after its first words, is called the Enuma Elish. It tells of a great conflict among various gods, whose war with one another led to the creation of various parts of the world. What is created as described on each tablet of this Babylonian text is similar to what is created in the Biblical text on each day. Both texts culminate in the creation of humanity. From the Babylonian perspective, humans were created to be slaves of the gods, so the gods could get some rest. ² In the Hebrew account, humans are created in the very image of God, who then blesses them, and sets them an example of rest on the seventh day, as an additional blessing. Comparing the Genesis account to the Enuma Elish, we can see what the biblical authors were trying to emphasize in that context, where the Hebrews were being held captive in exile. How vulnerable they must have felt, their future so questionable, so far away from home.

However, their hope was based in their understanding that there was but one God. They understood that creation came about, not out of a capricious battle between various gods,

but by the deliberate decision and artistry of the one sovereign God. This is the God who looks at each act of creation and labels it 'good.' Unlike the pantheon of gods, with each one having only a singular specified area of power and dominion, the God affirmed by the Hebrews has power over all areas. It was quite a faith statement being made by the Hebrew people, under their current conditions, where they were being held by those who worshiped other gods.

From the creation account that begins the book of Genesis, we see that the God of the Hebrews had no spatial or temporal limitations like the gods of other Middle East peoples. As well as creating the vast cosmos, their God was understood to have also created vegetation and animal life. As a young person growing up in the church, I always thought the detail in the Genesis account about God creating "the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm," was an odd detail to include. But in the Enuma Elish, it is a god (Tiamat) who takes the form of a great sea monster that gives birth to a whole generation of deities. This sea monster is later defeated by the head of the Babylonian pantheon (Marduk). But the God of the Bible is in complete control over any powerful sea monsters that had been depicted as the most powerful Babylonian gods. God delights in each act of creation, including the creation of humanity, after which God labels the accomplishments of creation as 'very good.'

Psalm 8 shows us an example of an appropriate way to respond to the God of creation, recognizing God's majesty and glory in creation, delighting that God is more powerful than any enemy or other entity, rejoicing that God has intense interest in humanity and gives us the task of being stewards of the earthly part of God's creation.

Today is Trinity Sunday, a reminder that it was the same powerful and creative word of God that came in human form in the person of Jesus. It was the same wind or spirit of God that was there to see and move over the waters in the dawn of creation that began to be poured out upon humanity on the day of Pentecost. Like the ancient Hebrews, we too make affirmations about our God in a particular context. The current creation narrative that many believe is one where creation came about as just one big happenstance or that there is nothing in the whole cosmos that cares about what happens on this little blue marble of a planet hanging in the dark depths of space. I hope you and I don't have to go all the way to the moon to gain perspective on how special the created order is, or to see the richness of our faith's understanding of a powerful and caring God. There was One who spoke and creation came about. There is One who saw what was created and labeled it 'good.' Would that all of us on the good earth could see what God has done and say with conviction, "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

¹ http://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/planetary/lunar/apollo8_xmas.html

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EnumaElish>