

## **Asking the Questions, Telling the Story**

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### THE PROCLAIMED WORD

*I once visited a psychic in New Orleans, but I was disappointed when she asked me my name!*

*A professor in seminary once asked me which was worse, ignorance or apathy. I said, "I don't know and I don't care."*

*When I was child, my older cousin was going through her vegetarian phase...I asked her once why she was a vegetarian, and she told me that it was wrong to eat animals. Innocent child that I was, I asked her, "if it's wrong to eat animals, why are they made of meat?"*

*Why are people so proud of being modest?*

*If everyone is unique, is anyone?*

*Why do bankruptcy attorneys expect to be paid?<sup>[1]</sup>*

These questions and ponderings have been flooding my mind lately, which makes me think I may be in the placebo group, but they do bring up the fact that humans by nature are inquisitive. We think about things. We have questions. We try to make sense of things. That's what we see as we read the opening lines of the book of Genesis.

Genesis opens with a creation story that goes from chapter 1 to the 4<sup>th</sup> verse of chapter 2. And then, Genesis gives us ANOTHER creation story, very different in almost every detail. To make matters even more interesting, the SECOND creation story is actually older than the first. And, to really give us a brain cramp, these stories about the beginning of time that appear on the first couple of pages of our bible are not the oldest stories in our bible.

In Genesis chapter one, there is a pre-existing Cosmic ocean and heaven and earth are created when a divine wind blows over the waters. God then creates light before God creates the stars and sun...the things that give light. Whoops! After God had created the world, God created humans, men and women simultaneously from nothingness and told them to run things. God then takes a break and blesses the day of rest. The end.

In chapter two, after verse 4 that is, we don't see a cosmic ocean. In this version, God creates the earth from nothingness and includes an underground spring to moisten the ground. From the moist clay, God creates a man and then God plants a garden and creates a lot of animals and finally, God removes a rib from the man and turns the rib into a woman. And P.S. the man and woman were naked but not ashamed. The end.

In one story, creation results from a dance of wind and water and the breaking forth of light. Humans are created all at once from nothingness and God rests after working so hard. In the second story, the earth (rather than humans) is formed from nothingness and the male human is formed from the earth. Later, the female human is formed from the male human and everyone is naked and OK with it. Even if we wanted to take the creation story literally, we would be forced to ask, "which one?" They are too different to both be factual.

So, if, say, the Exodus story is actually older than the creation stories, or if the story of Job is older than the creation stories, and if the creation stories we have not only contradict science and reason but also contradict one another and are placed in backward order of when they were

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<sup>[1]</sup> One-liners shamelessly "borrowed" (and sometimes adapted) from the Internet

written, what are we supposed to make of all that? It's very confusing, unless we understand why these legendary accounts exist at all.

The creation stories are the result of hundreds of years of human reflection: people pondering, questioning, thinking, imagining, wondering, and trying to make sense of things. It's what we do. And the process must be considered sacred, as the creativity that comes from such questioning, pondering, searching, and imagining opens our very canon of scripture.

Our creation narratives are the result of prolonged, communal and personal reflections on the meaning and origins of life. People had encountered hope and despair, joy and disappointment, community and loneliness, love and rage, peace and passion, agony and relief, boldness and cowardice, victory and defeat. They had experienced the human capacity for brilliance and shame, holiness and evil. They had seen life and death and the close relationship between the two. And in all of this, they longed for meaning and purpose and they assumed God must be somewhere in the mix. And so they asked where? Why? How?

Two of the stories they crafted in response to those questions are found on the first pages of our bible. The stories aren't meant to answer geological or geographical or historical or anthropological questions...they are meant to help people ask their philosophical and religious questions. They are imaginative ways of asking, not definitive ways of answering. Perhaps that's why two different, contradictory creation accounts remain side by side in our bible...to let us know, these aren't answers...these are ways to question.

And that's a pretty good bible lesson about the creation myths in our bible. But aren't we focusing on hope today, and isn't this the first Sunday of Advent? Yes, and yes.

You see, just as people of faith turned to story-telling to make and find meaning in and of their lived experiences in the days that produced the creation narratives, people of faith long after turned to poetry, art, music, drama, writing, and storytelling to make and find meaning in and of their lived experiences. Hopefully, we still do!

And so, in the weeks leading up the Christmas, we will be hearing ancient prophecies that were later creatively applied to Jesus. We'll hear hymns and poems and stories trying to make sense of how and why Jesus changed lives, and continues to do so. We'll hear narratives that show people struggling with the difficulties of encountering the divine somehow in Jesus only then to watch him suffer and die. And then, when they could not let him go, or when they found that he had not let them go, there are more stories trying to make sense of his on-going presence in their lives.

What our ancestors did with the creation stories, the early church did with their stories about Jesus. They took their lived experiences, as confusing and contradictory as those can be, and they told stories to sort out the meaning and to find God in the midst of it all. And in the process, they discovered hope and healing and wholeness...in a word, salvation.

Our sacred stories do not always accurately reflect what did happen, but they do a marvelous job of preparing us for what does happen. And knowing that, we get to tell our stories...both the stories we have inherited, and the ones we have created in response to our own lived experiences, and in so doing we are very likely to discover the presence and the power of God. Such discovery will still fill us with hope, healing, wholeness...in a word, *salvation*. This is the good news. Amen.

## THE AFFIRMING WORD

I boldly ask my questions!  
I fearlessly tell my story.  
I experience the presence of God.  
I am blessed by the power of God.  
I'm filled with hope!  
I rejoice in my salvation.  
And so it is!