



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**TRINITY
SUNDAY**

JUNE 4, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

In the penultimate episode of the popular and acclaimed Apple TV series *Ted Lasso*, I was struck by a seemingly passing comment that one might easily have missed in a show saturated with the wit, wisdom, and one-liners that writers get paid for – when they are not on strike. The context eludes my memory, but owner of the English football team coached by Ted Lasso says, “There is nothing like the truth to ruin a good story.”

Which brings to mind the creation story from Genesis we just heard and oddly enough Pontius Pilate. Do we remember Jesus on trial before Pilate, and Pilate almost as an aside worthy of Shakespeare muses, “What is truth?” For most of my life – actually until very recently –, I thought Pilate was asking what was true, what is the truth. But that was not what he meant. He was asking just what he was asking, “What is truth?” How do we define truth. Is it just factual accuracy? Or is it something deeper?

When I first read the creation story again last week, it struck me that in one sense, the truth really can ruin a great story. Yet, on the other hand, a good story can speak great truth, though in a very different sense. It is true that the creation story hardly may be considered an accurate chronicle of creation. Our Hebrew religious ancestors who compiled the Old Testament never intended that we treat it as an accurate, comprehensive narrative of history.

First, there are two distinctive creation stories in Genesis. The one we read this morning emphasizes the creation of the physical world and has God ordering a pre-existing chaos.

The second, which follows it in Chapter 2 of Genesis, places more focus on the creation of humans. And God created the earth out of nothing.

Furthermore, when Genesis was drafted, it was fully consistent with the scientific knowledge of the day, but that hardly compels us to treat as the science book it never was intended to be. When we hold up the stories of creation in the Bible to the current state of scientific knowledge, we see nothing about the Big Bang or evolution, and of an earth that is round

instead of flat and covered by a dome. Or an earth that is surrounded by the vacuum of space instead of water.

We might find it disturbing, disorienting, or even threatening, to treat the creation stories in Scripture as other than factually accurate. We might be tempted to let that truth ruin a good story. But it should not.

Let's remember that the Church understands that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God. Period. Full stop. But that hardly forecloses the necessity of interpreting the Bible.

We might remember – and this would drive our more fundamentalist sisters and brothers crazy – which came first, Church or the Bible. There had to be a Church, for example, to determine what of the many writings about Jesus would be included in the New Testament. A number of early writings, including some so-called gospels like the gospel of Thomas, did not make the cut, when the canon was finalized in the fourth and fifth centuries.

The early Church had to determine which writings reliably and authoritatively reflected what it had come to understand about Jesus, keeping in mind that it took over three centuries for the Church to define even its basic beliefs in the Nicene Creed. And we still need the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, to aid and inspire us as we read, interpret, and appreciate the words of Scripture.

Indeed, we should take great comfort and confidence from the constant presence of the Holy Spirit in every phase of the formation of the Bible from the stories shared orally by early cultures and communities, to the words first committed to writing, to the editors and redactors, to the translators and even the copyists, and to the councils of the Church that ultimately decided which writings to canonize, that is include in the Bible. To me, at least, the constant and continuous presence of the Holy Spirit in every step of the process is far more worthy of awe and praise and trust than the notion that God somehow dictated every word of Scripture in a scrivener's ear or dropped manuscripts directly from heaven.

And we always should remember that Scripture is a theological reflection on history and historical events, not a purportedly factual or historical account. But none of this detracts from the veracity or reliability of Scripture as a means to understanding God, ourselves, and our relationship with God.

Indeed, we shortchange the Bible when we read the text and stop there. It is easy to read the text and take it literally or simply transplant it from the context of the first century, for example, to the 21st century. But God gave us memory, reason, and skill, and the Bible deserves that we engage them. And when we say we find authority in tradition of the Church, a large part of that tradition finds its roots in our interpretations of Scripture.

Which takes us back to not letting the truth ruin a good story. And to Pontius Pilate and what is truth. A good story can speak great truth...even if it is not true in the sense of being factually accurate. So focusing on factual inaccuracies always will be the enemy of the greater truth which the stories in Scripture intend to reveal.

So what truth might we glean from this familiar story - or stories - of creation. One basic thing should be obvious from the creation stories. As our pastoral counseling professor the late Will Spong described his theology in simple, straightforward terms: There is a God...and it's not me.

Moreover, there is a sovereign God of total and uncompromising power who created the cosmos and rules over all creatures and creation. Everything that exists or becomes originates from God's commanding word.

Let's not neglect to notice, too, that creation may have been dramatic, but it was peaceful, in marked contrast to the creation stories of other ancient cultures. Thus, it set the pattern for a world without violence.

And creation is fundamentally good. It is in accord with God's aim and purposes. Even "the creeping things." Although a cockroach darting across the kitchen floor can cause me to question that.

And who is in charge now? We are. That is why God made us:

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.

Given dominion, we are like kings and queens responsible for the well-being of their subjects, or in more contemporary terms, we are stewards of creation, accountable to God tasked us with its care.

Fortunately, we are made in God's image, which means we are enough like God for God to communicate with us and for us to respond. We might say, we never will be aliens in the presence of God.

And thank God he made both men and women, and not just to assure that we could be fruitful and multiply. Don't get me wrong. Procreation is important. And essential. But then if we, both men and women, are made in God's image, then God is not a he. God is not male. God transcends sex and gender. Strained through a history of patriarchal societies, where males were dominant, the vision of God became masculine. Men were dominant, so God, also dominant, must be male. But male and female God created them...in God's image. And God said nothing about one's being submissive or unequal to the other. Two millennia into the New Testament we are finally beginning to figure that out and what it means.

Another lesson we learn from our being made in the image of God – and it is one of the great lessons that we tend to overlook because how can rest possibly compare with the creation of the world. But God rested on the seventh day. God rested. God needed rest, and we need rest. It is part of being human, made in the image and likeness of God.

We cannot exist without rest. The older we get the more we appreciate that. The Sabbath is not so much about coming to church on Sunday, though we highly recommend it – something about the Sabbath's being hallowed and blessed, which does not suggest to me, at least, a five-dollar latte and the *Sunday Times* at Starbucks. The Sabbath is about being the human beings we were created to be and resting just as God did on the seventh day.

One more lesson from the creation stories about the Sabbath. There was no evening on the seventh day. We will see no sunset on our relationship with God.

Which takes us to right where we are...in church...on our Sabbath.