

# RYE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## SUNDAY SERMON – JULY 31, 2011

Genesis 1:26–2:3

Mark 1:4-11

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### **“Beginnings, Ends and Middles: “The Water’s Fine!”**

I suspect I’m dating myself rather badly with this, but I remember a conversation with one of our kids talking about a confusing sentence they had written. I asked them, “What would that sentence look like if you diagrammed it?”

I got an absolute blank look in return. “Diagram? A sentence? What are you talking about?”

Surely this wasn’t only taught in upstate New York public schools in the 1970’s... Perhaps you remember it – drawing the line, and the space for subject, verb; the line for prepositional phrases hanging down below. I can remember having races in class at the chalkboard – “Ready... Go! Diagram that sentence!!”

I’m not thinking they do much of that anymore – diagramming, chalkboards OR competitive problem solving in front of the whole class. Some of us are still recovering from that kind of thing.

Yet if one were to resurrect one’s long-dormant sentence diagramming skills, and apply them to these creation story passages, a very clear pattern emerges. There really is only one subject – one “actor” in nearly every sentence in the first two chapters of Genesis. God, and pretty much God alone ends up in that subject space in every sentence. God speaks. God separates. God acts. God creates.

It is a reminder to the downtrodden and disoriented exiles of Israel for whom the creation story was written. And with that it is a reminder to us, that God is God. God creates “in the beginning,” and now amid the chaos of life, God once again will bring order and purpose and meaning. In that, it is a call to faith – a call to trust in the ongoing creative goodness of God – even when life may give us precious little evidence some days to back up that idea. We are called to faith –as the author of Hebrews puts it, to the “conviction of things not seen.”

That said, reading on into the story as we did today, while God is nearly always the subject, clearly humans have a key place in the story. But what is it? And what does it mean for us today?

There are perhaps two ways to read it. On the one hand, human beings are not created until day six. We are that little bit of work done right before God’s quitting time. Seen that way, it may bring a little perspective. Just in case we get too much of an idea that WE are at the center of the universe, we are reminded that there are five other days worth of creation out there! It makes a good reminder to those who insist on doing things like talking loudly on their cell phones right in the middle of Starbucks.

Hello!! It isn't really about you! There is the rest of creation – five, God-sized days worth – and we all don't need to hear about your day. Sorry - welcome to my pet peeve. This is what happens when your pastor writes sermons in Starbucks.

But beyond pet peeves, it's also a pretty good reminder as we think seriously about larger environmental impact issues like global warming, sustainability, carbon footprints and the size of the cars we drive. It reminds us – we are not alone here. It's not just about us.

On the other hand, even as creations of the last day of the week, clearly God has also given us a special role. We alone are made in the image of God. We alone are made so that our lives would show something of God's grace and care and faithfulness to the world around us. And to us alone does God give responsibility to tend and to care for this great garden we live in. Even "dominion," which has all sorts of negative connotations for us, is a call to faithful care for creation and all that is within it. It is a call to be good stewards of all that God has created and all that God has entrusted to our care. We are to join God – we are to operate with God's spirit stirring within us and working through us – to be participants with God in God's creative and ongoing endeavor to make all creation new and good.

Interestingly, these are the very same themes that show up each time we celebrate baptism. Listening to the liturgy, the themes emerge: God is at work; God creates; God sustains; God cleanses; God leads us; God forgives; God joins us together. It is then (and only then!) that God sends us out to do something. As in creation, in the re-creative act of baptism, God once again is the subject – the primary actor.

It is why I so deeply love the tradition we have of baptizing children. For this sacrament is not about what they are to go and do as newly baptized people. It is not primarily about their covenantal or moral responsibility. First and foremost, loud and clear, the starting point is God - God's grace, God's loving initiative, today seen toward Chase and Christian – God's claiming of them just as God did to Jesus in the Jordan – "These are my beloved sons, in whom I am well pleased."

In that, we are reminded again. For as easily as we get focused inward on our lives and what we are doing – our survival, our success – and as much as we tend to see religion as morals and doing good for others – it begins, instead, with God. And throughout it all - at the beginning, through all the middles, at every new beginning in our lives and through to the very end – first and foremost, God. A very good and loving God is at work – creating, recreating, sustaining, guiding, seeing us and all of creation through.

And like in the creation story, in baptism, God extends to us considerable freedom. With God as the primary actor, there are few clear directives given to us in either place. God, in creating, does not force. God does not coerce. But God calls; God invites. God says, "Come, enter in and experience this new and good thing that I am doing. Jump in, the water's fine! Come take your place and as you journey on, find your way of living as a participant in this new creation – your way of both knowing delight, and your own creative way of bringing goodness and delight to others."

It is perhaps my greatest joy in what I do – not only the privilege it is to baptize your children, but then to step back and to watch. To see them grow up. To help nurture their connection to God when I have

the chance, and to watch them wrestle with who they are and who God is, and why they are here. And then to see them gradually step into their adult lives, and there discover, not simply how they will survive, but how they find their "calling" – their own unique sense of why they are here, and how they can be a part of the good thing that God is up to - here and now.

But it is not simply for our children. Today, as we have seen Chase and Christian baptized, as we make our promises, and more importantly, as we have heard God's promises to them, let us remember the truth of our own baptism – the truth of God's deep love for you and for me – the truth of God's forgiving grace, sustaining power and guiding hand, and the faithful, patient and gentle invitation of God saying, "Come, children of mine. Come find your place in the good thing I am doing, right here and right now.

May we have ears to hear, and hearts to trust.