

The Seventh Day

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Homecoming Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 13, 2015
Text: Genesis 1:1-2:3

Welcome to Homecoming Sunday! I know I've said that already this morning but I'm really just so excited this Sunday is finally here. We're calling it Homecoming Sunday because we recognize that folks naturally drift away from church over the summer. Let's face it. It's hot and those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer are more than a song lyric sometimes! Sundays in the summer can be a unique oasis of quiet and calm that offers balm to our weary souls. Church on Sunday, along with a whole list of other commitments, slips a little further down the list of things to do during the summer, and that's okay. We miss you when you're not here and we hold you in our prayers whether you're here or not. We hold down the fort, so to speak, until fall rolls around once more and the pews slowly fill back up.

That's why every September always feels like a new beginning of sorts for the church. And, a big fan of beginning at the beginning whenever possible, I am especially pleased that we have chosen this "in the beginning" story from Genesis as our kick-off story for this year in the program life of the church. This biblical story of Creation is one of the elemental stories of our Christian heritage. And, like so many other stories we consider

here on Sunday mornings, the Creation story of Genesis 1 is a story we think we know so we kind of half tune it out as we hear it. But do we really know it as well as we think we do? I doubt it.

The Creation story has been the focal point of biblical scholars of every type for centuries and most have come to a few basic conclusions about the story and the biblical book in which it appears. One thing to note is that the entire book of Genesis is a collection of stories about beginnings – the beginning of the universe, of life on earth, and the beginnings of the Hebrew people as the people of God. When you look at it in its entirety, the storyline of Genesis clearly traces a storyline of beginnings from a universal one – the beginning of everything – to a focus on the beginnings of this very particular people of God. This story in Genesis 1 reveals more than a few surprises for us, when we slow down and really hear what it's trying to tell us. For one thing and contrary to what we often think, this Creation story holds both male and female images of God made clear in the original Hebrew. God the Creator is clearly male, but God the Spirit, moving across the chaos of the water as wind, is clearly female.

We should also realize that in this act of Creation, God does not make something out of nothing, an assumption we all bring to the story. Rather, God is bringing order out of watery chaos. “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.” Sounds like a description of the first scene of a Tim Burton movie, doesn’t it? The words transport you to an overwhelming darkness where you fly unseen skimming the tops of inky black waves stretching to infinity in every direction. Then suddenly the wind blows and a voice thunders out across the darkness, “ ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” And so the story begins.

Except its not a story in the usual sense. It’s what biblical scholars call an etiology. An etiology is a story which is formulated by an ancient people to explain some sort of natural phenomenon, in this case, how the world as we know it came to be in the first place. Creation stories abound in all religions and most of them are remarkably similar. A deity or deities create the world by bringing order to the primeval chaos. The story is often recounted in the form of an epic poem or even a hymn, both of which are the case for our Creation story in Genesis. Because of the way it appears in the text – numbered verses in paragraph form written in prose – its origins as an ancient hymn are obscured. But we can see them if we look for them, right there in the ancient sing-song rhythms of the text: “And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” Then the divine actions of the next day of creation are described lyrically followed by “And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.” Gentle, beautiful, rhythmic poetry. If we close our eyes and

listen, we can hear the musical quality in the words. It was clearly written to be a song of praise and thanksgiving for all the gifts of Creation which surround us each day.

And so the rhythm continues throughout each of the first six days of Creation. Day One God creates light and darkness. Day Two could be its own sermon but for our purposes here this morning, it's the day God created the sky by creating space *between* the waters of chaos. I know, I know, it's not what we usually think it is, but that's for another time. Really. Moving on, Day Three is the dry land and the seas and the vegetation on the earth. Day Four is night and day, the moon and the stars and the sun to mark the passage of time and the seasons. Day Five is the fish and the birds. Day Six is the animals – and humans. “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” the text says. Note the absence of the mention of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. That would be in the second Creation story in Genesis 2 which is NOT a continuation of this story focusing just on humans. It is an entirely different story. Again, a whole different sermon!

Now we come at last to Day Seven which is, in fact, the climax of the entire Creation story. “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 he rested from all the

work that he had done in Creation.” On the seventh day, God rested. And the story stops there. No, “and there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day.” It’s not there because the hymn is over. The story is finished and it ends with God resting because creating a universe, a world and everything in it is just plain exhausting. Even for God.

One obvious question in response to this story has to be – who the heck do we think we are to push ourselves to do more and more, to work harder and harder – and then feel guilty about resting, taking it easy? If God needed a day off, why wouldn’t we? But then again, God isn’t us. That’s the whole point of this Creation story after all. God isn’t us. God is divine and we aren’t. That much is obvious. But God does care about us. God is paying attention to us. God wants the very best for us—always. Why? Because God created us, each and every one of us as beloved, unique, special individuals whom God beholds each day and says, “indeed, you are very good!” Every day! Indeed YOU are very good. *You*. Not the person behind you or beside you. YOU are very good because I created you that way. YOU are beloved of God, just as you are. Faults and shortcomings, gifts and talents -- YOU are beloved of God.

This is why God created one last gift especially for you in this wonderful litany of Creation magnificence. God created the Seventh Day, blessed it and hallowed it, just for you. Notice that

God doesn't command the Seventh Day – the blessed day – into existence. God recognizes the need for it, and there it is. God knows rest is vital to human life. God knows a day set aside to reconnect with your best self through rest is key to being the best *you* God created you to be. God knows a day set aside to reconnect with all the people important in your life is mandatory to keeping your sanity and your health. And, God knows a day set aside to take a moment to reconnect with God – with the faith, hope and truth that there is something bigger and more important than me and my needs – is also critical to renewing my life, myself, my soul every week.

That's what the seventh day, the Sabbath day, is all about after all. It's a 24 hour reminder that there's more to the world, more to life, than me and my endless pile of quivering needs. The Sabbath is a reminder that God created us, each and every one of us, to be the caretakers of this glorious Creation gifted to us and that caretaking work is hard! It's exhausting! It's never-ending. There's always something to do, somewhere to go, someone who needs us to do something. Such is life each day, at least for the lucky ones of us. The ones who are able to be up and about busy lives each day. The ones who have families to worry about, friends to keep in touch with, activities we enjoy doing with others. And we are lucky if we have the health and the means to be out and about and over the top busy, even if it is exhausting!

We are lucky to be exhausted because that means we have the wherewithal to be exhausted. So, being tired is a good thing, or so it would seem.

And being tired, overwhelmed, achingly anxious for a day to do nothing is exactly why so many folks are not in church on Sundays anymore. For so many families that hour on Sunday morning when they could be at church is also one of the only times during the week when they can take a moment to breathe! I know that! I get that! Heck, I've done that. Seriously. I get four vacation Sundays a year and I always used one of them as a "pass" on church. I know, I know. Shocking, right? Not really. If I want to know what's so great about Sunday mornings without church, I figure I needed to experience it. So I do, at least once a year. And let me tell you, I totally appreciate the attraction!!! That extra cup of coffee with the newspaper or a good book – Awesome! That long walk on the bike path or along the beach – Amazing!!! I truly get it that the draw of that seventh day to do nothing – absolutely nothing – is overwhelming!

So, I get that folks sometimes just need a Sunday off from church. I get that some days you can get more from a walk on the beach or a morning in the garden than you can from church, no matter how good the sermon is. ☺ I get that. But I also *know* that the seventh day is about more than taking a break from the rest of your busy life. I know that what makes the seventh day – the rest

day – truly unique is that it has been blessed and hallowed by God since the beginning of time. That’s the message of the whole Creation story after all. The seventh day is what all of Creation leads up to – not just to rest, not just to focus on me and what I want. The seventh day is to remember, to savor, to bask in, to revel in – God’s blessing, God’s hallowing or making holy – the whole of ourselves and our lives. The seventh day is what brings order out of the swirling darkness, the primeval chaos which is always threatening to overwhelm us in the world outside our doors. We know it’s out there. We see it on the TV news and hear it on the radio.

Dear friends, as you head out into your week I hope you will bring this Creation story with you as your story for it has always been. Each day of Creation is a gift just for you from your God. And the seventh day is the greatest gift of all, if you recognize it and honor it for what it is – the time and space to reconnect with what really matters in your life. I hope God is a part of that reconnecting for you in some way. I hope you are willing to invest some of that precious Sabbath day time here in God’s house in the company of other travelers on the journey of faith. Maybe not every week. *Probably* not every week. But at least some of the time, I hope. And when you do decide to join us on the seventh day, please know we’ll always be glad to see you. Always. Amen.