

Thanks, Ian, for tackling that very long reading today. Sometimes we can shorten the Lectionary reading and just pick out the “good” verses or the “main” ones, but this reading is the way our Holy Scripture begins. It is the very first chapter of the book of Genesis. It sets us up for everything that follows. It tells us a lot about who we are and why we are here. It is also beautifully poetic; it’s full of powerful imagery – chaos and wind... total darkness and then sudden light... oceans teeming with fish, dry land covered with verdant green plants and trees... a sky filled with birds... animals of every imaginable shape and size.

This first chapter in the Bible is our story...

“I don’t know if it happened this way, but I know this story’s true.”

A Creation Story from Finland – Susan Young

Long ago, in the beginning, Ukko and Akka lived in the sky. Ukko was the god of the sky and the weather and Akka was his wife and helper. (I should tell you that Ukko and Akka aren't their real names. Their real names are sacred and no one can say them.)

Ukko and Akka had a daughter named Ilmatar who they loved very much. At the time of this story, Ilmatar happened to be expecting a baby. Something happened, I'm not sure what, but somehow Ilmatar fell from the sky! It was a long way down and she fell for a long time. (That is why some people call her "Air Woman".)

Ilmatar fell into deep, dark water. She swam and floated around for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. Then some kind of sea bird started flying around her, looking for a place to land. Ilmatar let it land on her leg, or maybe it was her knee. The bird laid six eggs there. Some people say that five of them were made of gold and one was made of iron. As the eggs incubated there on her leg, they got hotter and hotter and Ilmatar got more and more uncomfortable. Finally, she gave a violent kick and the eggs went flying in all directions. Amazingly, the yolk of one of the eggs became the sun and the whites became the moon and the stars. The broken eggshells piled up and became land.

After swimming for such a long time, Ilmatar crawled up on the land and there she finally gave birth to her first son. She called him Väinämöinen. He was a very unusual baby because he was born already old and wise. He also had a wonderful voice and he could make amazing things happen, just by singing.

Later, Ilmatar had another son named Lemminkäinen. He was more of an ordinary guy and he didn't have any super powers. He was very charming and persuasive and he managed to talk his older brother into going travelling with him. Lemminkäinen and Väinämöinen travelled a lot,

mainly towards the north, people say. They had all sorts of adventures: they saw the world, fought the forces of evil and even fell in love a few times. Once they fell in love with the same woman and they fought with each other. You could say there was some rivalry between the brothers, but most of time they got along and were best friends.

There was a third son. His name was Ilmarinen. He didn't like to travel as much as his brothers and so he stayed mostly at home and became a blacksmith. He created lots of useful objects from iron and people really enjoyed using them, especially the cooking pots. Ilmarinen's masterpiece was a mysterious machine that he called the "Sampo". No one except Ilmarinen really understood how it worked, but its purpose was to keep all the Earth's systems, including human civilization, working properly. There are a lot of stories about what happened to the Sampo, but somehow it got lost. Since it was such a valuable object, that was considered a great tragedy. They say that even today, there are people who are still searching for it.

I'm not sure if things happened exactly like that, but I know this story is true.

"I don't know if it happened this way, but I know this story's true."

An Indigenous story from North America – Will Wightman

(Source: Bruchac, Joseph & Caduto, Michael J. "The Earth on Turtle's Back" Native American Stories. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1991. Used with permission from Keepers of the Earth by Michael J. Caduto. (c) 1988. Fulcrum Publishing, Inc., Golden, Colorado. All rights reserved)

Before this Earth existed, there was only water.

It stretched as far as one could see, and in that water there were birds and animals swimming around. Far above, in the clouds, there was a Skyland. In that Skyland there was a great and beautiful tree. It had four white roots which stretched to each of the sacred directions, and from its branches all kinds of fruits and flowers grew.

There was an ancient chief in the Skyland. His young wife was expecting a child, and one night she dreamed that she saw the Great Tree uprooted. The next morning she told her husband the story.

He nodded as she finished telling her dream. "My wife," he said, "I am sad that you had this dream. It is clearly a dream of great power and, as is our way, when one has such a powerful dream we must do all that we can to make it true. The Great Tree must be uprooted."

Then the ancient chief called the young men together and told them that they must pull up the tree. But the roots of the tree were so deep, so strong, that they could not budge it. At last the

ancient chief himself came to the tree. He wrapped his arms around it, bent his knees and strained. At last, with one great effort, he uprooted the tree and placed it on its side. Where the tree's roots had gone deep into the Skyland there was now a big hole. The wife of the chief came

close and leaned over to look down, grasping the tip of one of the Great Tree's branches to

steady her. It seemed as if she saw something down there, far below, glittering like water. She leaned out further to look and, as she leaned, she lost her balance and fell into the hole. Her hand slipped off the tip of the branch, leaving her with only a handful of seeds as she fell, down, down, down, down.

Far below, in the waters, some of the birds and animals looked up.

"Someone is falling toward us from the sky," said one of the birds.

"We must do something to help her," said another. Then two Swans flew up. They caught the Woman From The Sky between their wide wings. Slowly, they began to bring her down toward the water, where the birds and animals were watching.

"She is not like us," said one of the animals. "Look, she doesn't have webbed feet. I don't think she can live in the water."

"What shall we do, then?" said another of the water animals.

"I know," said one of the water birds. "I have heard that there is Earth far below the waters. If we dive down and bring up Earth, then she will have a place to stand."

So the birds and animals decided that someone would have to bring up Earth. One by one they tried.

The Duck dove down first, some say. He swam down and down, far beneath the surface, but could not reach the bottom and floated back up. Then the Beaver tried. He went even deeper,

so deep that it was all dark, but he could not reach the bottom, either. The Loon tried, swimming

with his strong wings. He was gone a long time, but he, too, failed to bring up Earth. Soon it seemed that all had tried and all had failed. Then a small voice spoke. "I will bring up Earth or die trying."

They looked to see who it was. It was the tiny Muskrat. She dove down and swam and swam. She was not as strong or as swift as the others, but she was determined. She went so deep

that it was all dark, and still she swam deeper. She went so deep that her lungs felt ready to burst, but she swam deeper still. At last, just as she was becoming unconscious, she reached out one small paw and grasped at the bottom, barely touching it before she floated up, almost dead.

When the other animals saw her break the surface they thought she had failed. Then they saw her right paw was held tightly shut.

"She has the Earth," they said. "Now where can we put it?"

"Place it on my back," said a deep voice. It was the Great Turtle, who had come up from the depths.

They brought the Muskrat over to the Great Turtle and placed her paw against his back.

To this day there are marks at the back of the Turtle's shell which were made by Muskrat's paw. The tiny bit of Earth fell on the back of the Turtle. Almost immediately, it began to grow larger and larger and larger until it became the whole world.

Then the two Swans brought the Sky Woman down. She stepped onto the new Earth and opened her hand, letting the seeds fall onto the bare soil. From those seeds the trees and the grass sprang up. Life on Earth had begun.

I don't know if it happened this way, but I know this story's true.

So many Creation Stories – and we have barely scratched the surface. Every culture has one, and most cultures have more than one, including our own Christian heritage. The story that I read for us today is the first chapter of Genesis. If we continue on into chapter two, the story of creation is told again, but with some differences. In chapter one, man is created last, after God has made everything else and is satisfied that it is good. God has thought of everything in a system that is interconnected. The last piece is someone to take care of it all. Man and woman are the final piece, creatures that, like God, can watch over it and make sure it is well cared for.

In chapter 2, the story begins this way:

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, ⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Man is created first and God creates a beautiful place for him to live, with no responsibilities other than tilling and tending the garden. This sounds like a pretty nice gig, gardening is a labour of love! There is just one request – don't change. Don't eat from the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" is the way the writer of Genesis puts it. God takes care of everything to make the man healthy and happy, even creating a partner for him to keep him company and help with the chores. Life is perfect! But the part God wasn't ready for was that those two humans grew up. They became curious, they longed to know more. Along comes a talking serpent who says, "What? You haven't tasted that fruit? You don't know what you're missing!" and the rest is history... Well, maybe not *history* exactly...

Marcus Borg quotes a Native American Elder as saying, "I don't know if it happened this way, but I know this story's true."

I love that. It makes so much sense to me. I have always understood that stories are powerful teaching tools. I used them in my classroom all the time with kids from kindergarten to high school. Jesus understood this. You make a rule, tell someone the way things work and they will hear it and listen, maybe... but tell a story and it sticks. A story well-told makes you think it through. The lesson is there, but you need to find it yourself.

One of the criticisms of the Bible is that it is full of contradictions – like having two different creation stories right at the beginning. Two stories, two (or more) different lessons – equally important. And I am just going to leave them with you today.

Amy Jacks Dean, a Baptist Minister in Charlotte, North Carolina has this to say about the Bible:

“For almost 30 years I have been frustrated with conservatives who get so hung up on a literal interpretation of what they consider to be an inerrant, infallible word from God - which misses the whole point of the truth! And, for the last 15 years or so, I have been equally frustrated with a liberal perspective that throws the baby out with the bath water by totally dismissing that which they can no longer believe. For those folks, if the story can't be true, they cease to go deeper for Truth.

Personally, I don't want some middle ground that is watered down so that we can all find a place of agreement. **I want a faith that is powerful and living and transformative and life-changing.”**

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's a complicated concept. God-in-three-persons... one God, three separate ways of experiencing this... Father, Son, Holy Spirit... Creator, Redeemer, Guide... Parent, Teacher, Comforter... God around me, God beside me, God within me...

When I was facing my interviews for ministry, I was asked about how I understand the Trinity and my answer was, it's just not big enough. I experience that which we call “God” in so many more ways than three. How do we label something we can't adequately define? How do we put the myriad experiences of that power we recognize in the world into one word or even three?

To me, it's like story – infinite ways to express something vitally important and every one of them true and every one of them also not quite enough to capture it all, not quite enough to be universally relatable. It's confusing, perhaps, but at the same time, it is what makes our faith rich and timeless. It is not a stagnant litany of facts, it is a continuous exploration of what God, or universe, or higher power, or Holy Trinity is trying to teach us.

So, on this Trinity Sunday I offer you this: I don't think God can be defined this way, but I know this way is true.

Amen.