

**Sunday, February 12, 2017 – Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer**

**Sermon Title: “What God Does: Creation and Providence”**

**Scripture Reading: Genesis 1:1-27, Psalm 8, and Romans 7:14-25**

(Psalm 8, which will be read in its entirety, will be our Call to Worship.)

Note: This is the sixth sermon in the series on What We Believe – a sermon about what God does, creation and providence. As with other topics in the series, we can't cover creation and providence adequately in one week, but maybe we can mention the highlights (and reflect on them).

1. The creation story found in Genesis 1:1 – 2:4 is the one we are most familiar with, but if you read the second half of Genesis 2:4, it appears that the story begins again with a second and slightly different account. Scholars have puzzled over this for centuries, as you can imagine, and have decided that the author took two separate (oral?) traditions and blended them together. If you've never taken the time to notice this, please take a look.
2. One of the most interesting verses in the entire account is 1:28 where God instructs “humankind” to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish...birds...every living thing that move upon the earth.” To some this suggests a hierarchical view of creation, in which human beings may “do as they please” with creation. What is your view of this? What is the proper relationship between human beings and creation? What is our responsibility to the air, oceans, and wildlife?
3. Another critically important verse to consider in the Genesis reading is 1:26 where we are told that God is making “humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” So, we were created in the image and likeness of God. It sounds good, but what does that mean or suggest to you? In coming weeks, we will acknowledge that this image has been badly damaged because of sin. We are very nearly unrecognizable images of the God who created us, but that image is still there, isn't it? Some theologians like to say that our glory is a reflected glory, like the moon (which generates no light of its own, but which can nevertheless shine brightly in the evening sky). What does it mean to you to have a reflected glory?
4. Please notice in connection with 1:26 the use of the plural! God says, “Let **us** make humankind in **our** image, according to **our** likeness.” The ancient Hebrews were strictly monotheistic in their beliefs – unlike most of their neighbors in the ancient near east – so this wording is even more unusual. Looking back through the lens of the New Testament, we can say that this is evidence of Trinitarian thinking. We might say, “Of course God is three persons in one being.” On the other hand, there are examples in the Old Testament where God is surrounded by heavenly beings – 1 Kings 22:19, Job 1, Isaiah 6, etc. I don't have a specific question for you to reflect on here, but I want you to take note of a mystery revealed here about the nature of God (in the very first chapter of the Bible).
5. Perhaps related to #4 we should note also that the God we meet here is one. There are no other beings, no rival beings, no one besides the Creator of the heavens and the earth. This is a powerful statement against other religions in the ancient near east (and perhaps religious thinking today as well) which assert a kind of dualism – a power of good in conflict with a power of evil. What the creation story tells us is that God alone is the creator of everything. Evil, then, can only exist as a kind of rebellion of the creation against the creator. Where does evil come from? The answer to that is presented in Genesis 3, which we will get to in a couple of weeks. But for now it is important to see that what God created was “good.” God was pleased with what he had created. Human life – physical life – is basically good, and not something that we have to cast off in order to enjoy a better spiritual existence.

6. The problem of evil is almost always discussed in terms of the doctrine of providence. God created the world and everything in it, and he continues to uphold, protect, rule over, and take care of his good creation. However, evil exists in spite of that. Evil is real. Evil is part of our lives every day. And this, simply stated, is the problem of evil. In other words, how can that be? **Which of these statements is true: God appears to be willing to prevent evil, but is not able. Or, God is able to prevent evil but is not willing.** Actually, either solution is unacceptable. So, what is there left to say? What do believers say in the face of this terrible situation? One response is to think of different kinds of evil. First, there is natural evil. Hurricanes, for example, which leave death and devastation behind, are a kind of natural evil. They can bring unimaginable suffering. Next, there is evil that occurs from our neglect to take care of ourselves or our neighbors. But that still leaves other questions unanswered. Evil is bigger than the occasional hurricane or the effects of human negligence. The existence of “free will” answers some, but not all questions about evil. Another answer is to suggest the power of Satan – see 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 – but if Satan is a fallen angel, the Bible shows little interest in where he came from.

There is obviously no way to address the problem of evil in one paragraph, but perhaps this will be enough to stimulate your thinking about why there is evil in the world, and where it comes from. Perhaps all we can know for us is how God intends to deal with it!