

Pet Blessing: St Francis Day

Gen 1.20-31; Ps 148.7-14; Gal 6.14-18; Matt 11.26-30

Trinity, Aurora

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The rabbis, so the story goes, had a question: Why does the first letter of the first word of the first sentence of the first verse of the first chapter of the first book of the bible start with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet? Here's the first letter:

א You can see that it's open to the top to the bottom and to each side. But here's the second letter, ב. Now remember that Hebrew is written from right to left. God answers the rabbis' question. The story begins with the letter א because what has come above and what has come before does not concern you; only what comes as creation itself begins to unfold.

A long, long long long time ago, a time before there was much of anything, as one modern one rabbi tells it, there was only God, a few angels and a swirling glob of, well, stuff.

The angels noticed this and came to God one day and asked: "Are you going to do anything with this ... stuff?"

And God said "Yup."

And God took some of the swirling glob of ... stuff and kneaded it and smoothed some of it so it became galaxies with planets and stars and moons and suns and earth and rocks and pebbles. And then God took a bit more of the swirling glob of ... stuff and squeezed it until some water came out and God made oceans and streams and rivers and mud puddles and plain old water.

The angels came by, took a look and said: "Looking a bit better. Are you finished yet?"

And God said, "Nope". And God took a bit more of the swirling glob of ... stuff and made it into hills and mountains and dirt and dust and then God planted trees and flowers and weeds, maybe just for fun. Then God took even more of the swirling glob of ... stuff and made some 4-legged and some eight-legged and even more-legged walking things and some swimming things and some flying things and even some creepy crawly things and the sea monsters for the fun of it and some things that only God knows what they are.

And the angels — ever watchful — noticed again. And they said: "Even neater. Are you finished yet?" And God said: "Nope."

Then God really did something different. God took some of the dirt and some of the dust and some spit and breathed God into them and made two brand new creatures.

And God said to them: “Welcome to the world!”

And the people — for that is what the brand new creatures were called — the people said: “Thank you.”

And God said: “I’m really tired. I’ve been working for several days creating the universe. It’s very hard work. I could use some help. Will you be my partners and help me finish creating?”

And the people said: “We’re awfully small and anyway we don’t have the plans and, by the way, what’s a partner?”

And God said: “A partner is like this: On the days when I’m too tired you will do the work and on the days when you’re too tired I’ll do the work. And in that way we’ll finish the work of creating together. Will you be my partners?”

And the people said: “Yup.”

Along came the watchful angels and they said: “Wow, really looking good, are you finished yet?”

And God said: “I don’t know. Go ask my partners.”¹

The Genesis reading that we heard a few moments ago puts it slightly differently than the story I just told, but the end point is really the same. Genesis tells us that God told the first human beings that all that was now in their care. And that would be because of all that was made — those stars and planets and rocks and rivers and mountains and flowers and flying things and swimming things and various legged things, only we are, claims the text, made in the image and likeness of the Creator of everything. Only we have the capacity to be with God, co-creators of all that is.

And should we need a further reminder, Eucharistic Prayer C, which we will soon pray, repeats it in yet another way: “At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home. From the primal elements you brought forth the human race and blessed us with

¹Adapted from Marc Geller, “Partners” in *Does God Have a Big Toe?*

memory reason and skill. You made us the rulers of creation.”²

But here’s the deal, as the Eucharistic Prayer continues, “...we turned against you and betrayed your trust”: For millennia, far too many of our ancestors and more lately we, have taken this business of ‘having dominion’ as the bible puts it, and determined that it means that we get to exploit it; let the next generations take care of the next generations. And anyway who cares about the snail darter or tree-huggers in the wilderness? We need gas for our cars right now. So we’ve merrily raped the earth by strip-mining coal and drilling oil and clearing forests for our use, left human debris from space programs and chemical poisons in the heavens, polluted the earth with such non-biodegradable stuff as styrofoam cups and plastic bags and other materials for our convenience, destroyed the careful eco-balance in our oceans and driven into extinction some of the very creatures and plant life that once happily and healthily shared the created universe with us. Well, of course you know all this. So finally, thankfully, many of us have to come to our senses and within the lifetimes of most of the people sitting here this morning, we’ve begun to realize the harm that we and our ancestors have wrought.

But we’ve really only just begun. Which is why days like this one, this commemoration of Francis of Assisi with its blessing of animals and plants, its remembrance of our furry and finned and feathered friends who have companioned us, are so important. This is not just a day for the children and their pets, though as Jesus reminds us in the Gospel, it’s the kiddos who often get the Gospel before we do. This is the sort of day for all of us to remember who we are and what are responsibilities are.

Back in Genesis we’re told that God, upon calling humans into being, blesses them, tells them to recreate themselves and to have dominion over everything that is, and everything that is, you will remember, is pronounced “good” at its creation. But before the blessing, before the invitation to join the creative and sustaining work that are part of co-creating, there’s something else. God says of the first humans and only at the creation of the first humans that these are the ones made in the image and likeness of God. Later on in the book of Exodus, God will tell Moses and the children of Israel that they are never to make any images of God nor any likenesses. It’s part of what many of us learned as the first commandment back when we were children. No likenesses of God permitted at all, ever, under any circumstances. Except one, and that one would be you and me. We are the only likeness of God around, the only one allowed. Don’t you find that astonishing and

² *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, 370.

even a little daunting? And there's more: The English word 'image' is a translation of a Hebrew word ____ and the Hebrew word ____ has within it another word ____ and that's the word that means 'shadow'.

When I was a kiddo, my dad loved photography, got himself a then-state-of-the-art camera and a light meter and a tripod and some sort of measuring gizmo and we, of course, were his main subjects. He'd get the stuff developed and bring home the slides. For my brother and me, the most fun of all of this was doing the shadows on the screen after the projector was set up and before the slide show. We'd make moving shapes with our hands get them in the projecting light and, wow: birds flying and dinosaurs menacing and whatever else our imaginations could come up with.

The thing about shadows is that they say something about the reality of what they cast. Once you have a shadow you know that the object that's casting the shadow is substantial, is real. We are the images and likenesses of God; we are also the shadows God casts in the world. And what we do or fail to do says something about the nature of the One we represent.

We didn't read the whole story of creation as told in the 1st chapter and a couple of verses into the 2nd chapter of Genesis this morning. Had we done so, you would have noticed a striking pattern: God calls something into being, pronounces it good and 'it was morning and evening' says the narrator. Over and over for 6 days: God creates, says "good!" and once even "very good" and "it was evening and morning" "it was evening and morning" "it was evening and morning" ... six times. The 7th day alone has no creating on the part of God, no value judgment, and most tellingly, no "it was evening and morning". On 7th day, God didn't come into the office to do the work that God had been doing. It shows an enormous amount of confidence on the part of God. Confidence that the work of ongoing creation will get done. And how? Well, those images and likenesses, these shadows cast by God doing the work God would do. The 7th day is still with us; we live in that long 7th day and now as then, God's relying on us partners to get the work of creating done.