

A New Look at Genesis, Part 2
A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss
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One of the delightful things about doing a two-part sermon is that one gets to hear some feedback before having to write the second part of the sermon. Things I've learned in the last week:

1.) When quoting long passages or multiple voices within a sermon, it would help to do something dramatic to delineate the speakers – perhaps even having different readers for the different points of view.

2.) It is hard to hear the language of Genesis even in a translation in which God is understood as the One out of which everything came and of which we are still a part – without having images of God the manipulator come up. For instance, is it possible to think of the creative process in the Universe as having a purpose or a plan - the discovery of which might prove useful in living our lives - without simultaneously bringing up issues like obedience and/or rebellion?

The book of Genesis, as I am coming to understand it, assumes a source of creative or sacred intelligence as present in the unfolding of the universe. There are patterns in the way things work – rather like observing that if a plant in good soil gets adequate sunshine and water it will thrive, and if it gets adequate sunshine and no water it will die.

When Genesis speaks of God acting, (another way of saying that the process is unfolding in the context of a field of intelligence), it's hard to avoid that image of the gray bearded old man from the Sistine Chapel - because we have been conditioned to think of God as a being rather than being itself. But the way the story was told originally meant the One, being itself, not a being. One way of understanding this is that when a religious tradition says, In the Beginning, God, ... it is saying that if we look towards the development of anything that happens we can discern a pattern in the way it developed which makes sense if we are willing to set aside our judgments about whether or not it should be that way.

At least as far as Neil Douglas-Klotz is concerned, mystics throughout the ages have been able to see into the essence of the story of Genesis and what they have discovered there is a way of understanding the world that contains a message that is very much needed in the religious understanding of the practitioners of the major western faith traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is also needed in the secular culture which at the moment shows such little respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part.

Now I would hasten to add that I am not suggesting that we should believe these stories because they are in the Bible. Unitarians long ago concluded that any authority the Bible has is due to whatever truth and usefulness the stories in it reflect rather than believing the stories are true because they are found there. Still, when there is a way of understanding the particular stories of Genesis that speaks to today's world, it seems to me that it is a very useful thing to know this and be able to share

it with those who believe that Biblical stories reveal something of vital importance to humankind.

So what other understandings has Douglas-Klotz gleaned from his mining of this treasure from a Semitic point of view? Well, after the One moved to being both Unity and the potential for diversity, the text suggests that “the earth (diversity) was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep,” which is to say that the potential for diversity was still only potential until “the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” With this marriage of spirit and potential things began to happen.

The next thing that happened is that “God said, Let there be light and there was light.” As Neil understands this, this is also the dawn of consciousness as in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, the word light signifies knowing something, intelligence or consciousness. Then God affirmed consciousness and differentiation as being good, but also affirmed that all the potential that existed in unconsciousness and the undifferentiated darkness was also good, and God called it a day.

Over the next few eons the differentiation process continues until, in the human version of the story, God proceeds to make humanity in God’s image. In one understanding of the story it is the consciousness of Unity that marks humanity as in the image of God in that humanity shares consciousness with Unity.

It is worth noting that at this stage of the story, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, creation is considered to be blessed in the sense of unfolding unobstructed along a sacred path emanating from the One. It is also very interesting to me that it is a story that closely resembles creation stories from the Far East whether the Hindu understanding that all creation came out of the original vibration Ohm, or the Taoist sense that it was from the nameless that heaven and earth sprang.

But then we come to a part of the Genesis story that has colored a great deal of later theological development - the story of ongoing differentiation that leads up to what is generally described as the Fall. The storyteller in Neil’s book tells it this way.

“The word for *Garden* in Hebrew just means ‘enclosure.’ *Eden* means ‘bliss’ or the seeming bliss of things that pass away in time. Adam is still the archetype of the First Human, but in this case s/he is the human being without self-consciousness, one who is embedded so completely in a sacred world that he or she doesn’t think of him-or herself as separate in any way. Now comes the tricky part.

“When Eve is taken out of Adam, she’s not Eve. Yes, you can look it up. She’s called in Hebrew ‘Aisha,’ which doesn’t stand for woman; that was only a later derivation. It stands for the power of creative initiative in a person, the intelligence that departs from its habitual pattern and unfolds toward something else. In the same place, Adam now calls himself ‘Aish,’ the human being who has a sense of him or herself as an individual being, yet is still embedded in a divine unity.

“All right. Now comes what is usually translated as the snake. But again it’s not really a snake. ... The word that’s translated ‘snake’ is *Nahash*, which stands here for (and can be translated as) the

aspect of a person's mind that winds around itself, that becomes self involved, that's greedy or selfish. You know how the more you think about yourself, the more tired you get? That's it.

"Now we come to the part with the tree and yes, you're right it's not really a tree. The Hebrew word stands for something that grows, which can be either food or what feeds some part of us. The knowing of good and evil has to do with being able to distinguish ultimately how a particular action will come out. If you do something that you think is helpful for a person, maybe it doesn't eventually turn out that way. Maybe you think your discovery will save the world and it ends up being a curse. We've seen that happen. ... What the "snake" offers to the creative initiative in a human being (Aisha) is the illusion that you can ultimately know how what you're doing will come out, and so you can start acting as if you were God. And yes, you're right, there's a lot of that going around just now, too. When we do that, then we're out of the garden. We're out of that moment or experience of bliss in which we live in a sacred universe, in rhythm with the source (by whatever name we call it)."

Wow! That's quite a different story from the one we have heard most of our lives isn't it. Again, it reminds me a lot of Taoism. If we could let go of doing things that we know are out of rhythm with respecting all people and the web of life on which our lives depend - which folks only do now because they convince themselves that doing so serves some higher end - what a different world we would live in.

Neil is convinced that if we want either internal or external peace, we need to return to this sense of living in harmony with the One. We need to abandon the idea that we can justify behaving in a way, which we know destroys part of the fabric of life, based on the belief that our goals are good and that therefore our good ends justify our current destructive behavior.

Is there any hope that we can get there? Well, if we focus on where we came from, using a religious or a scientific model, and do so with a sense of reverence, then we just might. Again, we are not likely to make it if we focus on our different end time scenarios. It matters little if it's a fundamentalist focus on pie in the sky or materialistic focus on fast food on earth; if we disregard the process of our living we're not likely to abandon our destructive patterns.

Still there is hope. If we focus on what we share rather than what separates us, possibilities unfold whether we are focusing on what goes on within a family, a community, a nation, or even in the wider world. Again Neil states it well, "Sixty [some] years ago, on the eve of the Second World War, it would have been impossible to predict that the nations of Europe could put aside their differences and emphasize what unites them in a shared European community. One hundred and sixty years ago, on the eve of the American Civil War, it would have been difficult to predict the same thing for the various states of the United States. Today it may be difficult to imagine a world in which every human being respects the sacred nature of creation and feels responsible for being part of an interlinked human community." But there is reason to hope.

One way of moving in that direction is to return to a meditation practice that accepts everything we encounter as part of the One without judgment. Douglas-Klotz does a marvelous job of illustrating how this can be done drawing on the sacred texts of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic

traditions. I believe it can be done equally well from a Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, or even a scientific perspective if one includes within the scientific perspective a profound respect for all that emanates from the One.

Meister Eckhart, 14th century German mystic points us in that direction with this meditation on The Path, taken from his last words.

“ Some people want God only as pleasing, enlightening experiences. So they get pleasing enlightening experiences but not God. It says somewhere that God shines in the darkness. Mostly you find God where you think you would see the divine light least. Some say, “I would be happy to look for God equally in all things, but my mind doesn’t work that way.” To bad! All paths lead to God and God is on all paths equally and consistently to the one who knows. “But even if God is on all paths equally, don’t I need to find a special way there?” Whatever way leads you most often to the awareness of the divine – follow that. If another way appears and you quit the first and take the second, that’s all right, too- if it works! Best would be to take God and enjoy God in any way, evenly, without hunting around for your own special way. That has been my way and joy!”

May it be ours as well.