

Worship and Perspectives Sermon

August 26, 2008

## *Honor, Accompany, and Invite*

*Genesis 1:26-2:4, 2:18-19*

I'll begin with a little bit of a confession:

like many of you, and (at least theoretically) all of our entering freshmen—I read and very much enjoyed David Quammen's book on Charles Darwin over the summer. And not surprisingly—given my line of work—that book led me to do some thinking about the Book of Genesis. That's basically the reason that this Worship and Perspectives service includes the few verses from the first two chapters of Genesis that we've just heard.

Don't worry—I'm not out to refute Darwin or engage in any kind of battle; as though Darwin's ideas and the Book of Genesis are mutually exclusive.

Although I think Mr. Darwin might well—and correctly—assert that his ideas and some interpretations of Genesis are in fact ultimately at odds, I simply want to suggest this morning that brief consideration of 3 particular images or ideas from Genesis 1 and 2 can be a useful and appropriate way for us to begin the 160<sup>th</sup> year of Austin College.

The few verses from Genesis that we've just heard don't originate from a single source. Biblical scholars tell us that the verses that Keatan read a minute ago actually come from two different sources—two different schools within the Hebrew tradition; each with its own particular emphases. The version of the creation story comprising Genesis 1:1 through 2:4 is generally ascribed to a "priestly" source, while the "second" creation story that begins in Genesis 2:5 is understood to represent the "Yahwist" tradition.

This is not the time to rehearse the history and theology of the “priestly” and “Yahwist” traditions – not to mention the Elohist and Deuteronomic streams that are also identifiable in the text of what we Christians call the “Old Testament.”

It is sufficient for our purposes today for us to recognize that the Book of Genesis is multifaceted – a sort of composite text in which a variety of theologians and people of faith have sought, in a variety of ways, to articulate some sense of meaning and value in the world in which they found themselves.

These early verses of Genesis include three ideas or images that might be helpful for us this morning as we think about ourselves, each other, and the students who we serve.

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The first image is found in Genesis 1:26.

*Then God said,  
“Let us make humankind in our image,  
according to our likeness.”*

Darwin objected especially to interpretations of this verse that suggested that its statement that human beings are “created in the image and likeness of God” implied that humans are distinct and separate from the biological processes that govern all life. Certainly many people have used this passage to argue exactly that – as though any notion of human value and uniqueness depends on a denial that humans are fully part of the patterns, processes, and limitations that are recognizable in all living things.

But there’s no reason to believe that Genesis should be understood as a work of biology or history. These texts don’t seem primarily concerned to explain biology or report history. They are about meaning and significance and value.

Genesis 1:26 doesn’t have to be read in a biological, historical, or evolutionary sense. The suggestion in this text that all humans somehow

reflect or embody the image of God has been taken by many interpreters to mean simply that *each* and *every* human has value – value that is inherent and not contingent on anything else.

To borrow language from Immanuel Kant: the suggestion that human beings are created in the image of God leads some directly to the ethical conclusion that humans are always to be treated as ends in themselves and never simply as means to some other end. In this understanding, the value of humans depends on nothing other than their humanness.

I think such an understanding of the nature and inherent value of each person is readily evident on this campus. We work hard to take each other seriously. And we believe that all of our students matter in a basic and fundamental sense. We think of them as more than just information receptacles and economic actors. In ways that are as diverse as our students themselves, we seek in all that we do to honor our students by taking them seriously and recognizing that each of them has inherent, unconditional value.

And some of us find insight and support in the Book of Genesis for this notion of the basic and profound value of each student.

When we're at our best, we honor our students.

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A second idea or image in Genesis that can help us think about ourselves, each other, and our students may be found in chapter 2, verse 18, where God says,

*"It is not good that the human should be alone."*

Many interpreters of this passage have dashed quickly from verse 18 to the creation of the woman, Eve, a couple verses later and then on to a bewildering variety of conclusions about men, women, sexuality, gender identity, dominance, and all sorts of other things.

But this morning, I think it's enough for us simply to pay attention to the text as we have it.

*It is not good that the human should be alone.*

Around here, we do some really specific things that indicate that – as an institution – we believe that.

In the next few days, we'll be welcoming over 300 freshmen. We've already placed them all in CI classes and residence hall clusters – and we won't let any of them live on campus without a roommate.

We don't think it's good for them to be alone. So we work hard to ensure that they are never isolated.

When students get here, we don't simply take their money and tell them, "The library's over there. We'll touch base with you in about four years to see if you've figured anything out."

From the day they arrive on campus, Austin College students are accompanied as they spend this season of their lives as part of this community. One of the primary ways that we honor and value them is by accompanying them as they learn about themselves and the world.

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The next verse, Genesis 2:19, includes one more really interesting idea that might help us think about ourselves and our students and what we're doing here.

In a really compelling and often overlooked scene, God follows the comment in 2:18 that it isn't good for the human to be alone by creating all sorts of new animals and then bringing them to Adam "to see what he would call them."

Again, I think that to treat this simply as prologue to the creation of Eve is to miss a very significant feature in the development of the characterization in Genesis of what it means to be human.

In verse 19, God creates all these other animals, but then Adam gets to name them. And, according to the text,

*Whatever the man called every living creature,  
that was its name.*

That's important.

I have a degree from a Presbyterian seminary. My doctoral studies involved Presbyterian Church History. I've read hundreds and hundreds of pages of Calvinist theology.

So I'm quite familiar with characterizations of a sort of over-functioning, OCD God who is apparently unwilling or unable to let *anything* happen without controlling it completely.

But that's not the God of Genesis 2:19.

In this scene, God invites Adam, the human, to participate in the ongoing process of creation.

It's really a pretty amazing story. God lets Adam decide what to call all these new beings.

According to Genesis, one of the prerogatives and abilities of the human is to *name* particular elements of creation – to play a real role in the ordering of things.

That's an idea can inform our approach to our students in a couple ways.

First, a case could be made that much of what we do at Austin College – both within and beyond the classroom – involves accompanying students as they encounter ways that some of their fellow human beings have sought to bring order to our common experience as humans by naming things--ideas or phenomena or processes or relationships.

Charles Darwin did that. So did Margaret Mead. And William Shakespeare. And Simone Weil. And Isaac Newton. And Albert Einstein.

And of course there are countless others whose particular acts of naming have helped us gain greater understanding of some part of ourselves and our world.

Further, this notion in Genesis 2:19 that humans have the capacity to participate in the process of naming and ordering creation should inspire us to empower and invite our students to make their own contributions to

our ongoing efforts to bring order, derive meaning, and make sense of things.

I don't think it matters whether or not you can convince yourself that there ever really was a man without a belly button or a talking snake. The "truth" of Genesis has much more to do with the relevance and usefulness of the ideas and insights contained in its words.

We will do well as we begin this academic year to heed those insights as we

- Honor all students and each student;
- Accompany them as we live and learn together; and
- Empower and invite them to make their own contributions to our life together – on this campus and in this world.