

Sermon 20.01.12

Genesis 1:1-5

In beginning, He, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and shapeless and darkness covered the face of the deep, while She, the Spirit of God pulsed over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Proverbs 8:22-36 New International Version (NIV)

“The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
I was formed long ages ago,
at the very beginning, when the world came to be.
When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,
when there were no springs overflowing with water;
before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
before he made the world or its fields
or any of the dust of the earth.
I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,

rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in the human race.

“Now then, my children, listen to me;
blessed are those who keep my ways.
Listen to my instruction and be wise;
do not disregard it.
Blessed are those who listen to me,
watching daily at my doors,
waiting at my doorway.
For those who find me find life
and receive favor from the Lord.
But those who fail to find me harm themselves;
all who hate me love death.”

SERMON:

William Young grew up a child of Canadian missionaries, living his first 10 years in a tribal village in New Guinea, fully immersed in that culture, experiencing community that deeply nurtured him, as well as abuse that caused scarring wounds. His family returned to North America where Young eventually went into the ministry, met his wife and together had children.

It was during his ministry that he engaged in marital indiscretion, for which he eventually publically repented before his church. In time, Church leadership asked he and his family to leave the church.

A week later, someone pulled into his driveway, a person who Young later claimed was one of the first within whom he saw God -- the worship leader of his former church. A black woman.

She got out of her car and said, 'I think they're making a huge mistake with you, I think we need to love you and be in your life. I don't care what the rest of them do, I'm committed to you and (your wife), and I'm going to be your friends through this, she said.

Young says this moment, this connecting and relating with her, changed how he viewed God.

We'll come back to how this moment profoundly influenced his life later...

That simple showing up and expressing love and commitment to relationship by a fellow church member made Young rethink how he viewed God.¹

¹ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/movies/ct-god-black-woman-shack-20161221-story.html>

How do we view God?

For many of us, we were raised with an image of God as Father - of God as He, and only He. This is nothing new, gender equality and the need to portray God as something more than the white dude with the long white beard, has been around for a long time. But I'd like to spend some time here again today, reminding us of the importance of seeing fully and being seen.

Father language, using the male pronoun for God, is scattered throughout scripture. Right here in the first verse of the first book we have "God, he created the heavens and the earth," and Jesus lovingly refers to God as Abba, Father, throughout John's gospel. It's here, throughout our biblical text. And we claim it. For some it's a beautiful, live giving image. What's missing is a fuller picture of God, a God who transcends gender, a God which is neither male nor female, yet both at the same time.

In her book *Womanist Midrash*, Wilda Gafney, an African-American Hebrew scholar, reminds us that translation is the first layer of interpretation of scripture. Translation is both art and science and the first layer of interpretation of this ancient compilation of writings.

Who translated what we read, she asks? Up until recently, the voice of authority, the voice who makes the bible accessible to us, has been a white, gentile, male voice. Nothing wrong with that voice, but we need to recognize that it's simply one lens from which to view scripture. It's as if we've been looking at the world, at God's world and word, through monocular vision. Monocular vision has no sense of depth - texture is lost and the world is seen from only one dimension.

Gafney brings a fresh practice to interpretation. She says that since there are feminine and masculine names, titles and images for God in the Scriptures, she genders God variously, sometimes feminine, sometimes without an articulated gender. She intentionally brings variation to her translation, knowing that male pronouns dominate and wanting to shine a light, to bring into our scope of vision, all aspects of God. As a translator, she is committed to uncovering God language that empowers all of us.²

When we make God only one thing, something, someone we think we fully understand and know, we've made God in *our* image, creating a God that is too small, too comfortable, fitting us. When God becomes like us, instead of us becoming like God, we've moved away from the God of the bible.

And so God-talk in worship is vitally important, because it slants and shapes our conceptions of God. ***Worship is a time we come looking for an encounter with God, and it's necessary to see God in all of her fullness.***

Gafney says the story of scripture is a story of relationships: relationships between God and creation, the Holy God and human beings and human beings and creation.

So let's look at the beginning, how this scripture, is relevant to us today. This is our origin story, our Genesis.

Gafney translates the first two verses as:

² Gafney, Wilda. 2017. *Womanist Midrash: A reintroduction to the women of the Torah and the throne*. Westminster John Knox Press.

Genesis 1:1-2 In beginning, He, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and shapeless and darkness covered the face of the deep, while She, the Spirit of God pulsed over the face of the waters.

In biblical Hebrew the first word of Genesis is **a** beginning, not **the** beginning. That translation came about later and is not truly accurate. In the original grammar, creation is a process of ordering and separation that begins with pre-existing chaotic matter.

Chaos existed before creation. God, he, creates out of that chaos. And the Spirit of God, she pulses, hovers, trembles over the waters.

In the Hebrew language all nouns have either a masculine or feminine gender. Where we, in English, refer to a table as 'it', in Hebrew it's given a feminine article. Biblical Hebrew lacks a neuter personal pronoun. And, sometimes the feminine is subsumed under masculine terminology - for example, several times in scripture the word 'sons' is used to refer to both the men and the women of Israel, where a reading 'the daughters and sons' of Israel would be more correct.

In beginning, He, God, created the heavens and the earth... the verb to create here is a masculine, active verb: he-created.

In the second verse: "The earth was formless and shapeless and darkness covered the face of the deep, while, She, the Spirit of God pulsed over the face of the waters" uses a feminine active verb: she-pulsed, or hovered.

Though the Divine is articulated with feminine and masculine gender in the Scriptures, in translation and tradition God has become virtually exclusively male. Whenever we read, or hear, the Spirit...rested on them, or the Spirit came upon the, or the Spirit of God made me... each time it implies the feminine. What is it like to hear, instead: “the Spirit, *She* rested on them” (Numbers 11:26), or “the Spirit of God, *She* came upon David” (1 Sam 16:13), or ‘but the spirit of the Lord, *She* took possession of Gideon” (Jud 6:34)? There are over 30 times when we could read our scriptures from this lens of the presence of the feminine Spirit. Hearing the feminine pronoun used changes it for me. Does it impact you? Intentionally presenting God with both masculine and feminine language changes how we see and *how we relate* to God. God is not exclusively masculine in nature, and it matters how we speak of God

And here, in our mornings scripture - She, the Spirit of God, She-who-is-also-God, at the dawn of creation fluttered over her creation at the same time as He, the more familiar expression of divinity, created all. They, Two-in-One, are the first articulations of God in the Scriptures. When God gets around to creating creatures in the divine image, they will be female and male, as God is. Gafney reminds us that feminine language occurs in the text repeatedly of God; this means that advocating for inclusive and explicitly feminine God-language is not changing, but instead restoring the text to its original form.

Feminine and masculine is different than male and female. We all, regardless of how we define ourselves, have both feminine and masculine qualities - feminine qualities of receptivity and nurture, and masculine qualities of clarity of purpose.

Both are necessary in each of us. Helen Luke, psychoanalyst and author writes: the masculinity of the spirit is meaningless unless it enters into a feminine container... In every creative act or transformation, she writes, the male and the female, the active and the passive, are of equal importance.³

All are created in the image of God. We need to claim that wholeness, speak that wholeness. Being seen as one created in the image of God matters.

Yesterday several of us went down to DC and spent the day at the African American Museum of Culture and History. It was a moving and humbling experience. The lowest level of the museum is crowded and dark, created that way to give the sense of being crammed in the bowels of a slave ship, While reading, seeing ways in which those captured were treated as less than human, I heard persons of color with whom I was rubbing shoulders let out deep, mournful sighs. There was pain in that moment, palpable pain. I wondered if it was a sense of finally having some part of their shared experience being named and seen. How we see God, how we see one another, matters.

That moment I spoke of in the beginning of the sermon, with William Young standing in his driveway with the woman from his church - in his pain he was opened to seeing God in a new way.

Several years after being asked to leave his church, after that driveway moment, William Young went on to write 'the Shack', a story of forgiveness and redemption. In it, he chose to portray God as a loving, all embracing black

³ Luke, Helen. 1981. *Woman Earth and Spirit: The Feminine in Symbol and Myth*. Crossroads. P. 7

woman: God as One-who-desires-relationship with every-body, she was inspired by the church member who came and offered love and acceptance at that low point in his life.

Young got a lot of push back, from various segments of society, for that portrayal of God, but he said that's just what he intended. He wanted his readers to look at how imagery affects our faith connections.

We come to scripture, we come to worship looking for an encounter with God.

The story of scripture is a story of relationships: relationships between God, creation, and human beings. God-talk in worship slants and shapes our conceptions of God.

God desires all of us - male, female, or gender fluid - to find relationship with Her, with Him, with that which transcends language.

In beginning, He, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and shapeless and darkness covered the face of the deep, while She, the Spirit of God pulsed over the face of the waters.

In beginning, out of the formless and shapeless matter of the universe, this He-She - greater than our understanding-God created and said it was good. It was good.

That's good news for us today, for this God continues to create, and invites us to see something larger than ourselves. We are invited to embrace all parts of ourselves - God is beyond gender and fully embraces all gender identities. We, each of us, in our beloved messiness, is found here, in beginning.