

I have been blessed these past years at Holy Family by having a parishioner, who is also a florist, offer me a great gift. Every holiday she makes a beautiful bouquet for my Mother -- for free. All I have to do is write a message on the card – and off it goes: instant credit with Mom. The next time I show up at home Mom always wants to show me the flowers. I admire my taste. Usually Mom says how wonderfully preserved they are. But the next time I go over she has me take the dried remnants out to the compost bin. No bouquet lasts forever.

Today we begin our presentation of the Great Story after four weeks of preparation. I hope you brought your Bible. The Great Story can be simplified into three acts – Creation, the Fall, and Redemption. If we get the beginning right, we'll understand the rest. If we get the beginning wrong, we'll be lost.

But first, how to read these early chapters. There are two creation stories in the Bible, Genesis 1 and 2. The Holy Spirit put them right next to each other. And in important ways they contradict one another on a

literal reading. For example, in the first story Adam comes last, after the plants and animals. In the second story he comes first. So, the Bible itself tells us that, while Genesis 1 and 2 tell the truth about creation, they don't do it as scientific texts would. There's historical reality here, but it's told via story and analogy.

In Genesis 1 we learn, not the details of how God created, but the why. Science is about the how of creation, but science can't address questions of meaning. Three of those questions Genesis 1 addresses are: "Why is there something, rather than nothing?", "Why did God create us?", "What does it mean that we're made in the image and likeness of God?" We need those answers, not just to learn information, but to encounter God, and be filled with trust and hope, because we're filled with anxiety. So, I'll focus on them today as a start.

Those who reject the creation story of the Bible can say, "All cultures have creation stories, and they're basically all the same." This is false. While there might be some superficial similarities between the

scriptural accounts of creation and those of the surrounding pagan cultures, the differences are stark. The creation stories of the ancient Near East were usually sexual and involved many gods. The gods weren't in control, fate was. The gods weren't good, but violent, greedy, lustful. The gods created human beings to be their slaves, and human life has no ultimate point or destiny. What reigns in such worlds is fear, anxiety, despair and the resulting pursuit of power, pleasure, and violence. When we don't know our roots or purpose fear reigns.

So, let's turn to Genesis 1:1-2. "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss." Notice: this is different from the pagan myths. Let me point out four differences. First, there is only one God, not many. Second, while I won't read the six days of creation, but in them everything God creates is good, very good. Only the Biblical God is conceived of as being Love itself – all good. Third, There's a beginning. God creates out of nothing, effortlessly. There is no battle or

sexual act with someone or something in order to create, as in the pagan myths. Fourth, God didn't need to create anything. He doesn't need creation – we're not His slaves. These basic differences between Biblical religion and the pagan religions help us answer those first questions I posed.

Why is there something rather than nothing? Because the Good God willed and intended to create it. That's why there's a you and a me. We exist by God's desire for our existence. Why did God create humanity? Not as slaves! Let's look at Gen. 1:26-28. "Let us make man in our own image; after our likeness. Let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals . . . God created man in his own image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.'"

That human beings are made in the image and likeness of God is unique to the Bible – no other religions claim that. Why did God create

us? He created us to be divinized. Here's II Peter 1:4, God "has bestowed on us the very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature." Let that sink in. Our destiny is to share in God's life and nature. That's why God made us. That is why every human life is so important.

What does it mean to be made in God's image and likeness? It means we know ourselves the more we know God. And only God can perfectly reveal who we are. It means we have intellect and reason - so we can understand the order of things. By reason we can recognize God's voice – our conscience. We have free-will, because we can't love without freedom. Freedom is not the ability to do what we want, but the capacity to do the good – to love. We're ordered to God. He has made us for Himself and we'll never be happy until we rest in Him. Genesis 1:27 tells us, God made us male and female. Neither sex can give complete image of God – only both together. Sexual differentiation

is a good thing. This grounds marriage and sexuality in God's plan: more about this next week.

Finally, notice that there is no mention of death in Genesis 1.

Death is contrary to God's plan. This picture of human life is almost too marvelous for us to believe. But that's because we are so far from God, and this Biblical life is life is rooted in, and flowing from, God. So, to go back to Mom's bouquets. The secular world's story is like one of those bouquets. It will look beautiful for a time, as it lives off the life that flowed from its roots – the Faith. But it will wither eventually because it is cut off from its roots in Christ who is Love. That is what we are seeing in individual lives and whole societies today. So many of us try to live without knowing who and why we are.

Remember how I said Christianity is unique in revealing we are made in the image and likeness of God? Well, the greatest difference between all other religions and Christianity is that Christianity alone claims that God IS love. Remember week one's questions? Why am I

here? Where am I going? How do I get there? The answers to all three are in Genesis chapter 1 -- and are summed up in one word - love.

Why am I here? To love. That's what we were made for. Where am I going? To Love. I am meant to be divinized: to share in the interior life of God who is Love. How do I get there? By Love. By loving God with all my heart, mind, and strength, and my neighbor as myself. These are very different answers from what other narratives tell. And even if another story were to tell us that love is important (as some secular stories try to do) they can't tell why it is so.

We know. God is not just loving. God IS Love. And -- to jump ahead in our story to the third act -- Love became a creature to rescue us when we had cut ourselves off from Love like flowers cut and put in a vase. We were withering, and doomed to the compost bin, but Love came to replant us in His garden. More on this next week.