

Genesis 1:1-5

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”



Welcome to Trinity Sunday! This day is about God and about our relationship with God. In truth, we cannot know everything about God. Our minds could not possibly wrap

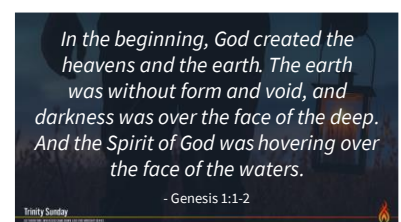
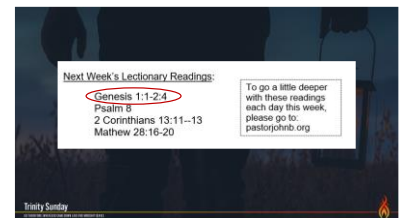
themselves around the vastness that God is. All that we know or can know about God is a description, a metaphor. We can grasp only a part of who and what God is. Today we keep the focus first on God, the creator, the source of all that is. In the creation story we find a God who is both immense and amazing yet is very detailed and purposeful.

As we look at creation, we see that God created with passion and purpose and love. All that God did was good and valued and worthy. In our two passages for today we find a God who is both far above us and yet desires to be our intimate friend. We find a God who is both out there and everywhere yet is also right here in our hearts and minds and lives. In our second text the incarnation of God who was sent into the world, in turn, sends the disciples and us out into that same world. We cannot make disciples of all people until we too learn to see the world with passion and purpose and love and until we too see everything that God did as good and valued and worthy. We cannot change the world unless we see all people as part of God's creation and as part of God's good plan. We embrace God most completely when we embrace all of creation, especially all of humankind. As we lean into these ideas this morning, let us pray...

We describe God as the Trinity because that is how we experience God and because that is how God is presented in the scriptures. As I referenced in the opening, God is something that we can mostly wrap our heads around, but not completely. The Trinity – God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit – are three parts of the same being. Turn with me to the beginning of the story, to Genesis 1, as we first see the three-in-one God at work. In the creation story we experience part of the wholeness of God.

Today we read only verses 1-5. The whole story runs through Genesis 2:4. I hope that you took the time to read the whole passage this week in preparation for this time together.

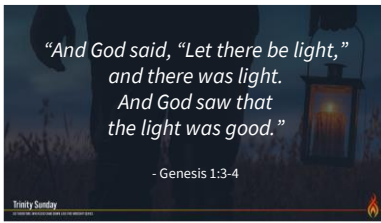
In the first two verses of Genesis 1 we read, *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth..."*



The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” Here we first see that “God” was the force or the cause behind the creation of all things. I put “God” in parentheses because in John 1:3 we read that *“All things came into being through him, and without him nothing came into being.”* John is speaking of Jesus here, the Word become flesh. John’s gospel helps us to understand some of the Trinity as we learn that the part of the three-in-one that we know as Jesus was present and a part of the creation of the world.

In these verses we also see that another part of the Trinity was present. *“The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”* How nicely that ties into last week’s Acts 2 text where the tongues of fire descended and came to rest on each believer. In the Message translation it reads, *“God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.”* This brings to mind a hen tending her eggs before they hatch, hovering over them, waiting for them to give birth. This too connects into last week’s image of the Spirit, bringing a new life in Christ as it came to rest on each of the believers.

This idea of new life is also found in the water. Much of creation comes from the deep – from the waters. In this sense it is the womb or incubator of many parts of the creation story. In the context of the ancient scriptures, the deep waters represented the unknown, the chaos, what was feared. In the ancient world, for example, sending sailors out to sea was a traumatic experience. The ritual for sending them out was much like a funeral and the return was celebrated much like a resurrection. Into the chaos and darkness and formless void, God acts. Into all of this, God acts.

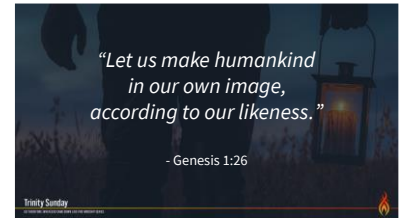


God first brings light. Since the beginning of time, God has brought light to the darkness. And since the beginning the light has been good. On day 2 God separates the waters into sky and sea and oceans. By bringing light and by separating the waters, God was staking claim as the Lord over chaos and darkness. By being light and by bringing order, God demonstrated that God was in control of all things. As the creation story continues to unfold, God enlists the aid of creation in the act of creating. God invites partnership. God, though perfectly capable of speaking and creating in a solo fashion, instead chooses to invite participation. *“Let the earth bring forth living creatures... Let them be fruitful and multiply... filling the earth...”* Here is where we first hear God saying to humanity, “Go therefore...” God gives humankind dominion *“over every living thing”* and assigns us stewardship over the world. Since the beginning of time, God has tasked humanity with loving and tending to and caring for God’s creation.



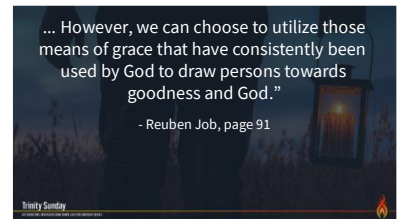
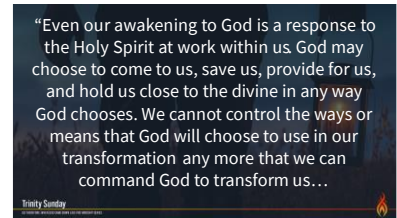
The story of creation, the story of God’s world, it goes on throughout the Bible. In 66 books that cover thousands of years, the story of creation and partnership and love goes on and on. The light continues to fend off the darkness. Good continues to fight against evil. Chaos raises its ugly head again and again and God’s Spirit continues to speak into our lives, bringing peace and hope. And, from time to time, we choose to become a part of the chaos, the darkness, the evil. We sin. We separate from God. Yet even when we feel as if our failures would prevent the sun from rising another day, it still crawls up over the horizon. The light once again shines light into the darkness. It once again brings good to fight off evil. Then we again see that God is still in control.

The God who created it all and set it all in motion continues to invite us to be a part of God's good creation. Why? Why does God invite imperfect, flawed us to participate in the continuing story of creation? Because we are made in the image of God. In Genesis 1:26 God says, "*Let us make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness.*" Because of this, we are to be in creation as God would be in creation. We were given the privilege of being a part of the story. A part of the story. We know that everything that is did not come about because of us. We know that all we are and all that we have really belongs to the one who first said, "*Let there be light.*" Yet we are invited to participate in God's ever-continuing act of creation. We are called to join in. We are called to go therefore into all the world.

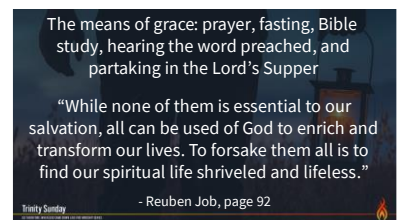
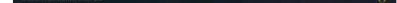
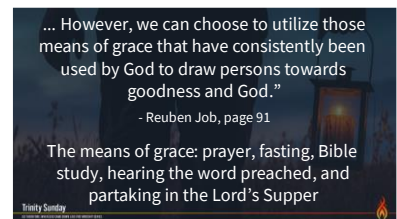


Turn with me to Matthew 28 as we explore this commission. In these words of Jesus we hear that it is time to go. To go, one must leave. To move towards a new tomorrow is often to leave a comfortable and familiar yesterday. To choose to go is to choose not to stay. As we talked about last week, the Spirit that descends on us and takes up residence in our hearts can and will show up at any time. And the Spirit, the *Ruach*, the wind, it can blow in any direction. This can make us feel a bit like the world at its creation. Choosing to allow the Spirit to have voice, choosing to allow the Spirit to lead and guide and direct – that can feel a bit formless and chaotic at first. So it is essential that we have a solid foundation. If we are to step out in faith, we must be firmly grounded in our faith. John Wesley identified and practiced some tools to build and maintain a strong foundation in Christ. He called them “the means of grace.”

In A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader, Rueben Job connects this all together. On page 91 he writes, “Even our awakening to God is a response to the Holy Spirit at work within us. God may choose to come to us, save us, provide for us, and hold us close to the divine in any way God chooses. We cannot control the ways or means that God will choose to use in our transformation any more that we can command God to transform us. However, we can choose to utilize those means of grace that have consistently been used by God to draw persons towards goodness and God.” For John Wesley and for us, to engage in these means of grace was and is a choice. I believe that Reuben Job is right - God in Spirit will come to us in any way that God chooses. We cannot control that, nor can we control how these manifestations of God impact or transform us. But we can choose to practice the means of grace that builds up our faith and allows us to walk in step with God.



For John Wesley, the means of grace were prayer, fasting, Bible study, hearing the word preached, and partaking in the Lord's Supper as the “essential means of grace for a hungry heart” (page 92). “For a hungry heart” – don’t you love that expression! Author Reuben Job goes on to write this about Wesley’s understanding of these means of grace: “While none of them is essential to our salvation, all can be used of God to enrich and transform our lives. To forsake them all is to find our spiritual life shriveled and lifeless” (page 92).



Perhaps one of the easiest means of grace to attend to is the habit of prayer. That is the focus of this week's discipleship class. It should be easy to pray, right? And, yet, a lack of time or depth in prayer is a common frustration for many of us. It is not any easier for clergy, apparently. A recent survey found that the average pastor in America spends only three minutes a day in personal prayer. Three minutes a day. When we are in a crisis or in the middle of a struggle, we can pray like the saints of old. Or like a soldier in a foxhole, to quote a familiar line. John Wesley was known to pray for one hour each morning. When asked what he did when life got especially busy or frantic, his response was that he prayed for two hours each day. In our study this week, Nehemiah provides us with another excellent example of a good prayer life. When he heard about the situation in Jerusalem, he sat and mourned and prayed and fasted for many days. Nehemiah came before God day after day, seeking God's guidance and direction. His steady, honest, and sincere prayer provides a great example for us to follow.

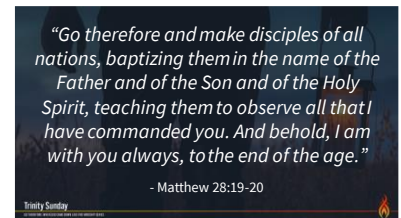
Participation in the ongoing work of creation is a choice. So too is attending to our prayer life or to any of the other means of grace, for that matter. Again, it is the Spirit that works within us, transforming our lives. Transformation is one of the key actions in our gospel text. It is what follows the "Go therefore" command. As we turn to Matthew 28, we join the disciples as they gather on the mountaintop that

Jesus had directed them to, waiting for whatever is next. The location is significant. Mountains in the Bible are what scholars call "theological signposts." When someone is called to the mountaintop, something significant is likely to happen. And it did this day!

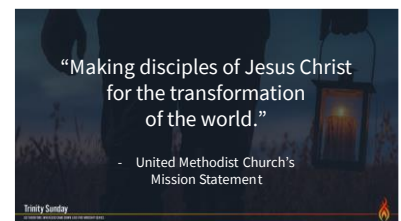


In Matthew's gospel it moves quickly from Jesus' death to resurrection and then to Jesus sending Mary and Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. Standing on the mountain, the disciples had no idea about what was going to happen. Jesus then appears on the mountain. Typical of our humanity, in verse 17 we see that some worshipped Jesus and some still had doubt in their hearts. In the next verse, Jesus states that all authority on earth and heaven have been given to him.

And then we get to the crux of it in verses 19 and 20, where Jesus says, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* Here is where the work of discipleship is found. Here is where the disciples received their commission and here is where we receive ours.

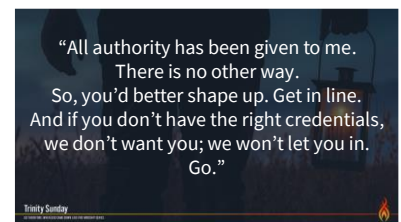


You might recognize the similarity between these verses and this statement: "Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." This is the United Methodist Church's mission statement. Please say it with me. Say it again! There is a passion and a gusto when said by some Methodists. It really depends on how we hear the word "go." Paired with Jesus' statement that he has been given *"all authority on heaven and earth,"* we feel like are going forth empowered by the King of kings and Lord of lords. Filled with a holy confidence, we can go forth ready to share the good news with all we meet.



The sad truth, though, my friends, is that the church has not always done this well and, quite frankly, at times we have gotten it wrong. Verse 20, which reads *“teaching them to observe all that I have taught”* in our translation today is more often translated as *“teach them to obey.”* For too long in the big “C” church, teaching them to obey meant searing it into their souls, putting people in their place, holding them under the thumb or heel until they gave in.

The Great Commission, sadly, has been and still is being used as a license to hate, to wield the sword, to shame/put down/look down upon those who don’t measure up to some manmade standard. For centuries Christianity said something like this: ‘Go, run over the world until you’ve made it into the image that is most palatable to you.’ And in more recent times, the Great Commission reads more like this: “All authority has been given to me. There is no other way. So, you’d better shape up. Get in line. And if you don’t have the right credentials, we don’t want you; we won’t let you in. Go.” That last ‘go’ certainly has a different meaning, doesn’t it? Now, to me, this version has a very different feeling from what Jesus originally said and meant when he was speaking to the disciples.



On that mountaintop, we remember that some disciples doubted. As they gathered, they brought with them their wounds, their failures, their disappointments, their fears.

They sound a lot like the typical Sunday morning crowd, doesn’t it? Like them, some of us have our doubts. Some of us have a sense of inadequacy.

Some of us have a few skeletons in the closet. So maybe we too think that we should keep our faith to ourselves. Don't bother the neighbors. If so, we have heard Jesus' commission all wrong. It is not about being right all the time, it is about being made whole. It is not about being triumphant over others, it is about sharing the joy we find in Christ with others. What if "*all that I have commanded you*" was just Jesus' way of saying that his way, his life, his teachings are just a better way to live and be in the world?

What if when Jesus says to "*make disciples*," he is not envisioning an anvil used to pound them into faith but instead he sees us living in relationship with others, modeling the love and hope that we find in Christ? Today, I think Jesus would say this: "Go. Go spend time with people, value them, respect them, get to know them, learn from them, help them, tell them what makes you who you are in me." Like creation, becoming a disciple is an ongoing process. So, my friends, may we make disciples as we as being made into a disciple ourselves, continuing to be shaped and formed, remade and renewed by God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider the charge to "*go therefore and make disciples*" who or where comes to mind for you? What is your first step?
- 2) *Pray*. Where in creation do you see injustice or evil? Take some time this week to pray about this. Seek ways God might be asking you to respond.
- 3) *Study*. Read Mark 16:14-18. How does this account differ from today's account found in Matthew 28:16-20? What does it add to your understanding?