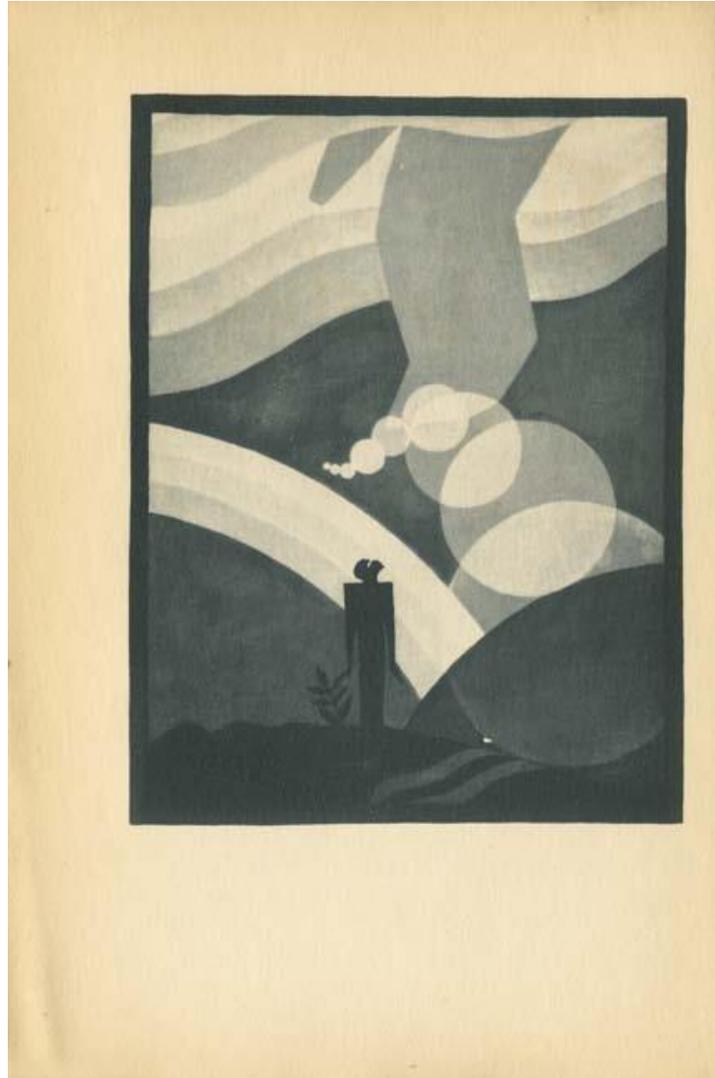


Reflections on Genesis 1:1-2:4a by Steve Cook
Episcopal Church of the Advent Zoom Worship
First Sunday after Pentecost
June 7, 2020



“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.” When reading this story of creation, I like to focus on the last line as the place to start instead of where it actually starts – the “in the beginning” part. Focus on the beginning-ness of Genesis 1 has often led to coopting it for purposes it never had in mind. That Genesis 1:1 and the first half of Genesis 2:4 share the common phrase – “the heavens and the earth” – also encourages me to read the ending with the beginning. It might be helpful to know that some consider the phrase “the heavens and the earth” a poetic device by which two contrasting or complementary words designate a totality. With this phrase Genesis 1:1 and 2:4a speak of the creation not just of heaven and earth but of everything in between. What the concluding verse inserts that is not in the first is the word “generations” – a word that Genesis will continue to use often as it narrates a story of God’s relationship with humans. The Hebrew word for “generations” – toledot – is a

noun based on the verb “to give birth” also used for nouns like “child” and “midwives.” Toledot. Our Genesis text sets in motion a generational epic that involves everything God made.

Generations of readers have been drawn to the language of goodness that abounds in this morning’s text. The word “good” appears seven times. At each stage of commanding something new, God looks, and all is good. That goodness has been inspiring to many – an affirmation of God and creation, ourselves included. For generations, questions have also been asked about how we can speak of the good in creation when so much seems bad. One of the ironies scholarship has noted about this morning’s reading is that while it stands at the head of Genesis and the Bible, it was probably written later than the chapter that follows. This account of creation is often considered in light of the final production of the Hebrew Bible after Israel had been through the devastation and trauma of the Babylonian exile. As a text that looks back through generations of suffering, this Genesis text is audacious and bold to speak with assurance of God’s ultimate power and goodness.

Generations of readers have drawn inspiration from Genesis 1 to affirm life, dignity, and worth when systemically oppressed. Its culmination in verse 27 with the creation of human beings in God’s image has been especially important for those seeking justice. This morning, I want to share with you “The Creation” by Aaron Douglas, a painting used to illustrate James Weldon Johnson’s poem of the same name in *God’s Trombones* from 1927. For generations, African Americans had endured chattel slavery. With emancipation did not come full citizenship and rightful place in U.S. life. Instead, there was generations of lynching, segregation, redlining, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. Douglas’ visioning of God’s created humanity as black, not white like on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, stands in a long tradition of reading the Genesis text as both affirmation and protest. For our moment, we must recognize how “The Creation” bears witness that Black Lives Matter in the cosmic order of God’s creation. To name Black Lives as integral to the goodness of God’s creation does not deny that all humans are made in the image of God. Rather, it recognizes the destruction to God’s good creation done by generations of racist actions, policies, ideologies, and structures. Generations of white silence, ignorance, and apathy, too. To say Black Lives Matter calls us, members of the Episcopal Church, to commit to anti-racist practices and the dismantling of white supremacy to honor all that God has made. May our generation be the one to celebrate finally the full and awesome goodness of God’s creation. Amen.

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