

Theology for Thinking People: Created in God's Image
From Genesis 1

Years ago, when I was a seminary student at Pacific School of Religion, Greg Bergquist—who is a friend to many of you as he is to me—was my faculty advisor. It's a long tradition in seminaries for students to do something that PSR called a 'Middler Review'. It's an intensive mid-program assessment of how your coursework is going, what directions you might want to pursue in the time you have left in graduate school, how your sense of calling is holding up under the grind of academic requirements. You prepare for it by writing a paper on your beliefs, what you have learned, what you know you still need to learn; asking others to assess what capacities they see in you and who you are becoming.

I should say here that I was not a person of great faith when I entered seminary. In fact, the application form had a question something like 'Tell us about your personal faith,' and I answered with something like, 'I don't have any.' I went to seminary intending to study Ethics. I planned to teach ethics to lawyers. (Don't laugh.) But I fell in love quickly as I began to study what other people had discovered as they pursued an understanding of something transcendent. It re-shaped me. Studying religion gave me faith; I found, for what felt like the first time in my life, that there was an intellectual discipline that could also pull on my heart.

My Middler Review process culminated in a meeting of a handful of faculty and student colleagues who had reviewed my paperwork. They were there to ask me questions, a little like a thesis defense. Greg was there, and he said to me, with some surprise in his voice as I remember it, "You're a theologian!" By which I think he meant that I am someone who thinks about and articulates ideas about who God is. Who we are in a world where God is present.

Ever since that day I have worn that description Greg handed me like a precious jewel. I keep it close to me, like a necklace tucked under my collar. No one else needs to see it. I know. Someone else saw in me and named the power to say something important, maybe even something true, about the Holy.

For me that has become my life's work. Greg's offhand comment, which he no doubt has forgotten, gave me confidence to keep trying to say something about the things that matter most.

And now I am giving that jewel to you.

Because the truth is, we are all theologians. You too have the power to say something true about the Holy. Whatever tiny experience you may feel you have had of God, however much you are conscious you *don't* understand, you know enough to be called a theologian, which means, literally, someone who studies and speaks of divine things. You may not have an academic degree that confers that title; but you are, without a doubt, qualified to speak about God. Because you have been sitting in a front row seat all along, close to all the ways God actually lives. God doesn't appear in academic writings; God appears in life. Your life. In the people who live around you, in the natural world, the news, the ways we are with one another. These are the

places where God is found; and if you're paying attention to the traces God leaves behind, you too have something important to say about who God is and what holiness looks like.

In these next several weeks, I want to invite you to think like a theologian. On these Sundays we're going to track the same big questions that our 8th and 9th graders will be wrestling with in their confirmation class on Sunday evenings. They too will be invited to think for themselves about who God is, what they know not only from the traditional beliefs of Christianity but from their own experience. Pastor Jeremy has put together a brand new curriculum for our confirmation process, understanding that the way young people learn and grow faith is not by listening to someone else's beliefs, but by speaking and testing their own.

That's as true for adults as it is for teenagers.

One of the beliefs of the United Methodist Church I love most is that we don't all have to believe the same things. We can be in community with one another, thoughtfully and consciously, all travelers on the same road, even when we stop and find home at different places along the way. At the end of Confirmation, we invite students to affirm for themselves the vows their parents made for them at baptism, the beliefs that are traditional to the Christian creed. Sometimes they say, 'No, thanks,' and as long as they have been thoughtful about it, we honor their decision. And *then* we ask them whether they want to become a member of this church. And no matter how they have answered the first question, they are welcome here.

You are too. This is a church that not only accepts but *values* your questions and doubts. They too are part of faith. We'll end this series with Brian McLaren, who will be here with us at the end of February to talk about his most recent book, called *Faith After Doubt*. This wise, famous theologian of the emerging Church—he too has doubts.

There are two qualities that are necessary to every theologian. You don't have to go to graduate school to find them, but they have to be nurtured if you want to take seriously your place in the conversation about God. Sometimes the reminder that you need them will come gently, but sometimes it can feel like a rebuke, a correction. But without one you will lose your voice. Without the other you will lose your humanity.

The first quality is confidence. Confidence that comes with knowing you've been thoughtful about your own experience. This confidence doesn't always come naturally. I still ask myself, every Sunday morning, 'Who do you think you are, to presume you can say something that's true for anyone else?' But I know this: all theologians do, all that is required of us, is to put the story we tell about God up next to our lives, and then watch how they cast a different light on each other. A story of Jesus and the events that consumed the news this week. The story we read this morning, about how ancient people imagined an intricate universe beginning; and what you learned in school about science and evolution. The fear that lives in us today and the promises that have calmed people who came before us, who were also afraid. Any of us, all of us, can do that.

What theologians do, that we often don't think we're qualified or allowed to, is ask hard questions, questions that might not have answers. *Why* do we believe this? Does that story make

sense? Is it possible that we've thought too small about how things have to be? Does what I thought was true now seem like it leaves some people out? Theologians ask those questions because they have confidence—not just in themselves, but in God. They know God is bigger than the stories we have told about God. They believe that truth is sturdy enough, true enough, that it will hold together no matter what re-thinking we put it to. They trust that even the hardest questions, our most persistent doubts, will lead us in the right direction if we follow them. They remember that the story of God is still unfolding, that what strikes you as true today can be just as important as what somebody told you when you were six, or sixteen, or sixty.

The other quality of all theologians is humility. Good theologians begin a lot of sentences with 'Maybe' or 'I wonder.' They try on their thoughts, knowing that even the ones they love the look of might have to be discarded. They hold their beliefs loosely, because tomorrow a new insight might replace the one that seemed right today. They remember that we are always just barely hanging on to a truth that is so much bigger than what we will ever grasp completely.

Rachel Held Evans, the young writer and theologian who has articulated a Christianity for the next generation, started many sentences that could sound like a creed with the words 'On the days when I believe...' She knew that not every day will the world be explainable in the way that used to make sense. She knew that some days we wake up not sure of anything at all, and mostly we wander around in the dark.

But here's the thing. The opposite of believing is not doubt. It's apathy. On the days we don't believe, it's usually not that we doubt *what* to believe; it's that it doesn't seem to matter what we believe. Doubt takes you somewhere. It can lead you out of the darkness if you listen to it and follow it. Apathy leaves you stranded. It pretends that emptiness is enough. *We need* to believe. We need to know what we believe *in*.

This is our story: God spoke the universe into being. And then, at the very end of this supreme act of artistry, creation itself, after God had filled the earth with living, moving, lush and life-bearing things, God created beings who looked like us. And, our story says, God placed in those beings the same creative power, to name things: light and darkness, stars and sun and moon, every living creature. To speak out loud the words that will, or will not, hold the earth together. 'I'm putting all of this in your hands,' God said to those people who were us. 'I trust you with what matters most to me.'

You and I are theologians not because it's a title that brings honor. We hold together heaven and earth—in our words, our bodies, our art, in our actions. This is your birthright. It is also the responsibility that comes with your humanity.

You have something to say about who God is, and what God is doing. Just put your ear up close to God's heart beating inside of you, and listen for what is true. Try saying it out loud. Because who could understand the Maker better than the one who is being made?