

Creation Past and Ongoing: Tense Matters in Theology

Genesis 1:1 in the New Revised Standard English translation reads “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” making it an accomplishment in the past. Past tense, “created,” is also used in the Revised English Bible from the United Kingdom, in the Roman Catholic New American Bible, and in the New International Version. And then we come to the Jewish Publication Society English translation which translates Genesis 1:1 thus: “When God began to create heaven and earth,,,” breaking the past tense pattern in English. The Jewish Publication Society English translation was published in 1985 and 1999. The newish English translation, the Common English Bible published in 2011, duplicates the JPS translation, except for making heaven plural: “When God began to create the heavens and the earth.” Both the JPS translation and the Common English Bible offer a note indicating the past tense version as an option.

Those of us who gather for a revised and augmented prayer for “the start of day” have been encountering in its Affirmation this description of God’s creating: “We believe in God who has created and is creating..”. I called attention to that tense difference in our conversing time at the close of our morning liturgy, to creation as not only an accomplished event in the past but rather as an ongoing activity of God with us, in us, in our midst as co-creators. Sean Whalen of our morning “start of day” prayer group remembered to me and us that I had worked with tense in the sermon for Sunday, January 22, noting Jesus frequent statement that the kingdom of God is near, really meaning here, now, with us as its inhabitants and co-creators with the God in Christ who continues to create in and with us.

We sometimes get stuck in longing for the way things were in some non-existent idealized past. Because it is what we grew up with it must have been the way God intended it to be. It can be scary to have creation and growth as an ongoing blessing of the God in Christ who comes to open our eyes to the light. So, no change except in the direction of the way it was when I felt more in control. “Don’t face me

with a new and expanded vision of God.” “ Don’t expose me to new hymns that preach along with the scriptures.” “Don’t face me with my wish to be in control.” We might say all those things to ourselves as the psalms and hymns and some of the recent Isaiah readings give us mirrors on the wall, mirrors we might rather cover over with pleasant scenery. Certainly not with knowledge that much of our “control” attitude creates a society where sometimes gun violence obliterates the loving selves we were created to be,

But now, in mid to late Epiphany as we gift each other with more of God’s light and hold each other in the light, we have the blessed opportunity to grow together. It is work, work that we are given the rest of Epiphany and Lent to undertake. And indeed, all of our lives. It is work we find it difficult to undertake, but also find in the midst of the frustration and pain, even when we disagree, that we are with each other. In that with-each-otherness we discover Emanuel, God with us.