

02.04.24 – Epiphany 5

“Two Firmaments”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Genesis 1:14-23 (NIV)

¹⁴ And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶ God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” ²³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

Leader: These are the Words of God for the People of God!

All: Thanks be to God!

Romans 8:1, 5-11 (The Voice)

¹ Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed, it cannot, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, then the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Leader: These Words of Paul Are of God. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Creator God, we thank you for our Bible Study, worship, and fellowship this morning. We are inspired by music, imagery in the Scriptures and on the bulletin, and the communion of learning and being together. May this new topic for our year draw us closer to you and to each other. Help us to understand its meaning and implications for our ministries and our personal lives. May this message continue

our journey into growth and beauty. Speak to us this morning in your Words and your voice through this servant messenger. Amen.

Happy Birthday to Scott Jones! It is a joy to have you here today, and to say I hope yesterday, your actual birthday was wonderful for you. May we also say a belated Happy Ground Hog Day! And this year it is happy because both Punxsutawney Phil and D.C.'s Potomac Phil did not see their shadows confirming an early spring! I do hope they are right! But as we know, only God knows and maybe global warming control the natural laws of the weather! I am also wearing a red jacket to honor February as American Heart Month. That was declared in 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, and then February 2nd was declared National Wear Red Day to emphasize heart health for women. You can find out more about your heart health in our Parish Nurse's article in Tuesday's Vision church newsletter. If you are not getting the newsletter, please give us your email or physical address on that white insert.

Last week I introduced this year's theme, "Finding Beauty," so you can imagine my joy going on retreat this past week for 2 days to a beautiful center near Sugarloaf Mountain. I could feel the stresses of life drop off as I got closer to the countryside surrounding the mountain. The center has a pond, a prayer labyrinth, a few Canada geese, and hiking trails. I found much beauty, rest, and inspiration there, but we can find beauty everywhere we look, even in the mundane things of life like preparing dinner, or in a twisted, gnarled, dying tree branch, or even in the belly of a whale like Jonah did (our Bible Study lesson for today).

Last week we also introduced creation and made it to the third day, so now we learn of God's system to create time, measurements, and

seasons: day from night, the sun, moon, and the stars. Over the centuries, there existed much fear about creation, the power of the sun and the tides of the moon; pagan rituals like lunar festivals, superstitions, and pagan temples honoring sun gods (little “g”) developed and were built to satisfy humanity’s lust for control of the world. In our time, there has always been a fascination with the stars, both the science of astronomy (using mathematics, physics, and chemistry to understand celestial objects) and the study of astrology (studying movements and positions of celestial bodies and how they influence human affairs and the natural world) stem from humankind’s desire to conquer space and stars.

Our focus of course is on God’s power to create, and God’s artistry as he created the world, and our interpretation of it all as inspiration for discovery and curiosity. Do you remember staring up into a night sky for the first time? How did it make you feel? Small, amazed, or perhaps in awe of the one who created those millions of stars and different galaxies some you could see with the naked eye and others you needed to use a telescope to perceive. This is one firmament: the natural universe created on the fourth day. Then Genesis describes the division of the sky, earth, and water with a diversity of sea creatures in it. One book calls them Treasures of the Waters—fish, birds above, and even whales. They served not just as beautiful living things, but also as food for predators and humans (eventually), and fertilizer for plants and trees on land and in the water. God saw that it was good and said be fruitful and multiply.

The term used today, firmament, is usually kept to the Bible, and was not in use until the 13th Century to explain “spheres” of sky or subjects uniting humans. France first used the Latin word for strength or

support, *firmamentum*; it was then used in the Middle English translation of Genesis and Exodus and continued into the King James Version of the Bible. For our purposes the **natural firmament** will refer to the “vault” God created between earth and sky (which included the seas), and the **spiritual firmament** will refer to our relationships with God and how we live our lives in faith and in Jesus.

It is the second firmament that the Apostle Paul refers to in his letter to the Romans, addressed not to a church but to a people who were loved by God and who loved God. They were both Jews and Gentiles, sinners, and law abiders, but mostly Gentile. Paul’s primary goal was to prepare them for his visit and ministry. He also intended to send a mission statement instructing them to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His third purpose was to unify tensions between Jew and Gentile sections of the people who knew God well. The section for today in Chapter 8 is about sanctification through grace. Grace is the key to this spiritual firmament of God’s creation. We could do a whole series just on sanctification, but let’s tie it into our general theme instead.

We have not yet met Adam and Eve but please pretend that you have already. In addition to the natural realms of heaven and earth, sky, sea, and land, the rhythms of lightness and darkness, now water creatures are multiplying. God approves of his work and the natural laws he’s established, and will bring about one more day to create, and then one day for rest. *[I am not debating the definition of days here, so please just follow the thought.]* Only God knows that the nature of humanity to come will contain sin, since he gives humans free will. He must allow then for mistakes, repentance, and forgiveness through Jesus’ salvation and

having relationships with a triune God: himself, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. To live in the flesh as Paul says is to live in the sinful ugliness of separation from God. The apostle Paul turns Jewish legal obedience upside down, using his own testimony to justify how following the law means nothing! To live according to the Spirit of God is to discover an inner beauty of grace, peace, and the sacrificial love of Christ. The body dies in a way, as the Spirit is reborn, recreated in God's likeness through the love and sanctification of Christ.

We visualize this love and grace by sharing the Lord's Supper today and the first Sunday of each month. We participate in the spiritual firmament by surrendering to his love and grace as did the disciples. We acknowledge that he died for our sins; we confess and repent of these sins, both sins of commission (what we did) and omission (what we did not do). This ritual of sharing the bread and juice representing Christ's body and blood connects our earthly sinful selves with our eternal saved selves, revealing both natural and spiritual firmaments, if you will. Although he suffered a painful death on the cross for us, he rose again on that third day to sit at the right hand of his father in heaven! We see both firmaments each day if we follow Paul's instruction. We must live according to the Spirit: ¹¹ "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you." God created us because he loves us, so we choose to live our lives **in him, through the Spirit and not** because we are obligated to. We celebrate The Last Supper in community often as a reminder to find beauty with the natural world of the elements, each other, and with the spiritual world of God's eternal gift of grace and

mercy. As we move into Communion will you join me in Finding the Beauty in both firmaments? Amen! ||

Let us pray.

Creator God, we thank you for creating the universe, sky, water, earth. We especially thank you for your son, Jesus, who helped us to understand your divine grace and mercy a little bit. Be with us this week as we ponder the two firmaments in our lives. Help us to trust the spiritual firmament more than the one we see. Please simplify these messages in our minds and voices, so that we can help others receive your redemption. It is in Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**