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A Creation Story

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From the Editor:

What a glorious spring! How lucky we are to live in such delightful surroundings. The Pacific Northwest is a gardener’s delight, full of fertile soil and scenic beauty. Our own Concordia campus is a wonderful example of the exciting variety of blooms, blossoms, greenery, and landscaping that can be achieved here. It’s such a treat to walk around campus and observe the many plants, lovingly tended by our grounds crew, all wildly blooming and sweetly scented. Your eye strays from one blossom to another...to the ivy-covered brick walls...what a great oak tree...look, there’s a daffodil next to a cigarette butt! Can you believe it? Somebody just threw their cigarette right there on the ground—right next to the ashtray! In fact, the whole ground here is strewn thick with cigarette butts—how gross!

We have a beautiful campus here—don’t ruin it by throwing your butts or other trash on the ground. Clean up after yourself. And if you see someone littering, get right in their face and demand they clean it up. We do not have maid service at Concordia!

A Creation Story
(for Jacqueline and Michael)
by Larry Gross

I’m not one given to explaining my art. Words don’t flow like paint, they stumble out of my mouth, a line now, a sentence after the morning coffee, and they seem to fall short of the mark most of the time. An artist of words might agree. It hardly makes sense to explain a good story. Can its beauty be relived by its mere retelling? I think there are as many ways to receive an inflexion as there are those designed—or even not designed—by the storyteller. Even the parts we haven’t planned are in the plan of the Maker. Maybe it’s like that with preaching, though I don’t have as much experience myself. Does the preacher simply read the sermon script? And how do we explain a good sermon?

The trouble is I am enticed into explaining this unexplainable mystery, that is, the immeasurable wisdom of the Creator, whose mark of creative energy is breathed into everything. It’s too amazing to explain. Indeed, it is wonderful because it is a mystery, a mystery that loses its impact, even causes me to sin against the first commandment, when I learn how to explain it. (Maybe it’s like the Hebrew nation who feared the name of God.) Instead, I yearn to experience a creation infused with what is incomprehensible, that character of God eternally implanted in all things, fixed in time, daimonos and kainos, everywhere and everywhen, from the first breath of creation. This wonderful story has continued since the beginning, because God’s signature is made known to humanity through the whole of creation. God’s creative word, spoken in the blackness, continues to sound from the throat of God, filling the universe with fertility, and endowing humanity with god-like imagination. I suggest this is an artist’s first “doctrine” of the creation story. (Genesis 1 and 2, “created in the image of God,” i.e., called to be creators. You know, I think William Blake might have said “Amen” to that!) If any of what I’ve just written makes sense, you will appreciate that my explanation of the painting will be a little different from when I painted it six months ago, and even more different from when I drew it in 1995. I began with Genesis 1, and I’ve experienced a few new twists and turns. Indulge me.

In the beginning there were Celtic knots. Here a trinity of lines, interdependently woven together, like a root system, from which each day of creation sprouts. They are painted a purposeful green. The ancient Celtic tribe was around long before the birth of Jesus, a Messianic people who readily accepted Christ as the Messiah when St. Patrick came. The knots traditionally symbolize the eternal, and the days of creation each grow from that eternal cord, suggesting that God continues to create in us, through us, by us, and in spite of us. Yes, we are part of an eternal creation story. And it is good.

The first day sprouts like a bright yellow flower against the dark purples of the mountain. There are two parts to this flower—a joyous light appearing like thin beads of light radiating from the center, and a delicate teardrop alluding to the separation of light and dark. At the end of the first day, God said, “It is good.” I remember a feeling of surprise at the sight of this first day in my painting. But I like it and I understand it better today than the day that the image was born.
The second day is firmament and waters. I don’t know the Hebrew words (inflexions), so I found myself depicting a tree on which the waters of earth sing in harmony with the ripples of heaven, the sky. I don’t know how to explain this, but as the drawing evolved, and later the colors, the concentric “ripples” of the sky grew from the yet uncreated flame on top of the hill. The unexplainable Mystery is a very generous designer and teacher. Compassion is in her house (Prov. 8), and she serves up a feast to those with open hearts.

I must have been listening when I was drawing the third day. I didn’t think of it that way, but the drawing came automatically. It was immediately obvious how I would represent the day God created vegetation. It’s a sturdy fertile tree, centered, like the tree of life in the garden of the universe. It is the axis mundi, life and death in one image. Its branches—interwoven with the concentric contours of heaven—reach up toward the ultimate source of life, a fertile flame on the hill. I look at the tree now and imagine a dance more wondrous than 50 sets of Celtic feet flying, and tapping in step with the eternal cadence. We are bound for that dance, and it is good.

The fourth day represents our assurance that God is keeping time. Scripture reminds us to pay attention to the day and night, the sun, moon and stars, the signs and the seasons. The trunk of this tree grows like a river, meandering where it will and leaving a path for us to follow. God is not out there somewhere, but in our lives daily, showing us the signs and encouraging us to follow. We wait and we watch for our time to be taught (Ecclesiastes 3).

Fish and fowl appear in day five, nearly repeating the theme of the second day. At times it’s difficult to distinguish in the picture, between birds and fish. They move together as the creatures of water and air and each assumes a unique role in the story. This too is good.

The sixth tree is nearer barren, and perhaps it should be. I hadn’t intended an ecological or environmental statement, but it’s worth the consideration. There are simply too many creatures to place in the sixth day, but never too many to celebrate the gifts of the designer. And doesn’t it figure that the human figures are “borrowing” nearly the only leaves left on the tree. I admit this day is unfinished. Perhaps it is my prayer for a day of blessing, a day that’s good beyond explanation.

And how does one picture the Eternal at rest? I decided on a sacred flame nestled at the top of a mountain, and casting a rainbow-like spectrum over all of creation. The flame is a fertile green, a reminder of spring. It yields an everlasting growth like peace that passes all understanding. That’s why the story of Creation continues. God blessed the work with a signature, and it’s in everything, and it’s in us. We are privileged now and then to see God in that signature, and we are prompted to tell the story again, even if it is a mystery. It’s how I often feel when I begin work on a blank drawing or painting. I may not understand what is about to happen, but I embrace the mystery nonetheless. The spirit of the work is alive, and I’ve learned to trust that the story will unfold in time. This is an incomprehensible blessing I hope I can never explain.

The (story doesn’t) End.

Genius

Creative was mind, no game was a pleasure; his “simple” thoughts and high test scores, no other was his measure.

Time and time again, his answer was always right; he wished he could be wrong and let out a laugh of spite.

The surface smile; a decoy inside; a mountain of hate, not even his glorious mind could predict this ill fate.

Countless weeks went by; the gun raised on the mantle, fearless, happy, and cold, no urge he could handle.

A note left like a memoir, a list of achievements and fame; for once a problem he could not solve no answer he could tame.

Chad VanDeMark