

Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens

and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered

or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice for ever

in what I am creating;

for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,

and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem,

and delight in my people;

no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,

or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it

an infant that lives but a few days,

or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;

for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,

and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

They shall build houses and inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit;

they shall not plant and another eat;

for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,

and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give

you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Sermon: Tohu va Vohu

Sister Virginia Muller never expected to be checking sports auctions online as part of her responsibilities for the Sisters of Notre Dame – an order of Catholic nuns based in Baltimore and dedicated to education. But when a brother of one of their members left all his possessions to the order, they found an old baseball card in a safe deposit box with a note that said: "Although damaged, the value of this baseball card should increase exponentially throughout the 21st century!" The picture on the card was Pittsburgh Pirates shortstop Honus Wagner – it dated to 1909 and was just big enough to fit in a pack of cigarettes.

For some reason Wagner objected to having his picture on the cigarette card and production was quickly stopped.. This scarcity has made the Honus Wagner T206 the holy grail of baseball card collectors, and I'm happy to report that this small, creased, mis-cut piece of cardboard brought a quarter of a million dollars into the Sisters treasury - money they will certainly put to good use for education, peace and justice.

It's odd the value people put on things. But then, baseball is as close to a secular religion as we come in America. It has its own cycle of yearly festivals, its saints and sinners, its holy temples and Elysian Fields. And it has its own myth of origin – which also made the news this week. The headline read: Myth of Baseball's Creation Endures, With a Prominent Fan

The old chestnut about Abner Doubleday's inventing baseball in a cow pasture in upstate New York has been so thoroughly debunked that it has taken a position in the pantheon of great American myths, alongside George Washington's cherry tree, Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed.

So it came as a surprise when a letter surfaced recently in which the commissioner of Major League Baseball, Bud Selig, wrote: "From all of the historians which I have spoken with, I really believe that Abner Doubleday is the 'Father of Baseball.'"

The letter touched off ridicule from historians and bloggers and provided fresh legs to an enduring legend that was discredited almost from the moment it was fashioned — in 1908, after the overlords of baseball sought an American creation story for the game and settled on a dead Civil War hero.

According to the baseball historian John Thorn, the only documented connection between Doubleday and baseball is a letter he wrote in 1871, while commanding a regiment of African-American soldiers in Texas, asking his superiors to “purchase baseball implements for the amusement of the men.”

People don't always welcome new information, or easily accept discoveries that challenge their accepted view of things, especially if it's sports or divine revelation. Many in religious circles have never been able to reconcile the story of creation in Genesis with astrophysics and evolutionary biology, even though genetic research reveals the incremental building blocks of evolution in our DNA and space telescopes continue to reveal mysteries at the center of our universe.

Just this past week scientists from NASA said they had discovered two bubbles of energy erupting from the center of the Milky Way galaxy. The bubbles extend 25,000 light years up and down from each side of the galaxy and contain the energy equivalent to 100,000 supernova explosions.

The source of the bubbles is a mystery. One possibility offered is that they are fueled by a wave of star births and deaths at the center of the galaxy. Another option is a gigantic belch from the black hole known to reside, like Jabba the Hutt, at the center of the Milky Way.

“And we think we know a lot about our own galaxy,” one NASA scientist added, noting that the bubbles were almost as big as the galaxy and yet unsuspected until now.

I think I'm going to go with a gigantic belch from Jabba the Hutt as the most likely source, or at least the only explanation I'll probably be able to wrap my mind around given my scientific knowledge and vocabulary.

We've discovered many facts about the origins of our universe and of life on earth and even the origins of human life, but these facts do not necessarily give us a clearer picture of the purpose of our life than the poet who lived three thousand years might have expressed with the lines:

O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"
(Psalm 8:1-4, NRSV)

I entitled my sermon this morning "Tohu va Vohu" That is a transliteration of the Hebrew phrase that describes the state of things before the creating work of God – formless and void, as we read in our Call to Worship: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void.

The first story of creation we read in Genesis tells how in six days God creates form and fills the void. There are really three sets of two days each day 1 and day 4 together, day 2 and 5, 3 and 6.

On day one God separates light from darkness and on day four he fills the light and darkness with with sun moon and stars.

On day two he separates water from the sky and on day five he fills the water with living things and the sky with birds.

On day three he separates the land and the sea, and on day six he fills them with living creatures of every kind and then:

God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

So in the natural world the ancients saw the hand of God – there was order, harmony, constancy – it was a blessing and it was very good.

But, when they looked at the affairs of nations, at the relations between neighbors, at the dynamic within families, at the worlds of politics and commerce – there they saw a different hand at work. It wasn't that people didn't know right from wrong – God had given Moses a very complete set of rules for this game but people ignored them – and they had ignored them for so long, and in spite of so many warnings, that some doubted things could ever be turned around with divine intervention once again.

When would somebody like Moses return to rescue them? like David? like Elijah? When would the words of Isaiah be realized:

For I am about to create new heavens

and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered

or come to mind.

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,

the lion shall eat straw like the ox;

They shall not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

This is the expectation that gives energy to Advent – this is the hope that finds fulfillment in the coming of our Lord.

But, it turns out, the world is not magically remade in a day, six days – or even two thousand years. God's creative work in Jesus Christ does not slay all the wicked and reward all the righteous in the blink of an eye – and Jesus warns them – the troubles of this world will go on – even intensify – but you must not lose faith, you must bear faithful witness.

The NASA scientist said: "And we think we know a lot about our own galaxy," noting that these energy bubbles were almost as big as the galaxy and yet unsuspected until now.

Jesus comes and says: You think you know yourselves, but there is an energy, a power, here that is bigger than anything you can imagine. The power is the grace of God, the means of access is faith – “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”” (Matthew 17:20, NRSV)

Nobody is going to put faith up for auction and sell it for a quarter of a million dollars – Jesus calls it a pearl of great price, yet we receive it free as a gift. Such things are not within the realm of our knowledge or vocabulary.

God heard the prayers of his people, he knew what was in their hearts - their desire for a new creation: a life not lived under the hardship of lowliness, estrangement, exploitation and fear of war. He hears them calling out for a Savior and so he sends the Son, his creative word incarnate, the beloved to answer their prayers.

But the new creation turns out to be this unexpected community of people just like you and me – imperfect people with varied gifts who are called to remember the rules, embody the grace, be generous with compassion, mercy and forgiveness, and give a faithful witness to the purpose and power of God - a purpose and power we know, not from the heavens above, but from the birth, life, death and resurrection of the our Lord.

Ah! Think not the lord delayeth.

I am with you, still he sayeth

Do you not yet understand

Look not back the past regretting;

On the dawn your hearts be setting

Come and join the Lord’s command

Even now the reign of heaven

Spreads throughout the world like leaven

Unobserved and very near

Like the see when no man knoweth

Like the sheltering tree that growth

Comes the life eternal here.

Not for us to find the reasons

or to know the times and seasons

Comes the Lord when strikes the hour

Ours to bear the faithful witness

Which can shape the world to fitness

Thine O God to give the power.