

Bereshit 5772

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely --
I'll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That's good!

Erev Rosh Hashanah as we returned home from a wonderful family meal at my sister-in-law's house, my 5 year old daughter, apropos of nothing in particular, suddenly blurted out a question: 'Mummy, why was the world created?' Well, there is nothing like a bit of theology on a festival evening and with a mother for a rabbi, you'd have thought that getting an answer to such a question would have been a walk in the park. But, truth be told, my husband is often far better with the kids' theological questions than I am. I have this unnerving tendency to fluster mildly when I'm not fully prepared with the right midrashic quotation and, besides, replying at Key Stage One level is not generally my strong suit. Give me MA students any day.

But I surprised myself this time. Instead of waiting for my husband to jump in and save me, James Weldon Johnson sprung straight into my head to save the day. James Weldon Johnson, you might well ask, who's he? He's the author of the poem, "The Creation", the beginning of which I began this sermon by reciting. I know this poem well – it feels to me as though I have always known this poem well, though such is not entirely the case. I learned off by heart these first three stanzas of "The Creation" as a young Brownie, in my Jewish Girl Guide troop, far too many years ago to admit to. I haven't the faintest idea why, but my troop participated in some public event – long since forgotten by me – at which each girl recited a portion of this poem. And I have never forgotten my bit from the very beginning: 'And God stepped out in space,/and he looked around and said:/I'm lonely --/I'll make me a world.'

James Weldon Johnson was an influential African-American in the early years of the twentieth century. He was involved in many areas of public life, including holding senior posts in the NAACP. But he is perhaps best remembered as an author and poet. And "The Creation" comes from his best known collection of poems, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. This collection was designed to be reminiscent of African-American religious oratory, particularly the so-called 'folk' preachers. Perhaps that is why it has stuck with me for so many years – it has the force of a fine sermon wrapped in the rhythm of poetry.

But "The Creation" has also stuck with me because it has the flavour of midrash – not the actual form or style of midrash, but it seems to address itself to the same lacunae in the text that midrash so often does and, moreover, as an African-American man writing in the early years of the twentieth century, there is much theological kinship with our rabbis of antiquity. 'Why was the world created?' – the text of the Bible never tells us. But James Weldon Johnson does – he heard the silence of the text and gave it voice. 'Why was the world created?' – because God was lonely, because God required something more in the universe than merely God.

So that is what I told my daughter. God made the world because God was lonely and wanted company. God created the world to have something to play with. God created the world because God did not want to be by God's self all the time. 'But, Mummy,' piped in my 8 year old son, 'why did people create God?' Oh dear, perhaps a tangent too far for our parasha of Bereshit this morning, but leave it suffice to say that by the time we got home that night, I was quite clear how many theists there are in my family. I am, currently, in a minority.

Still, the real import of my daughter's question is not where the answer ends up, but why so few of us ask the question in the first place. Creation is, after all, the most miraculous event in the whole of Tanakh. Forget the parting of the Red Sea or the exodus from Egypt or Elijah reviving that boy, creation is the single greatest mystery that exists. Why was the world made is a question that should preoccupy us all. Not how – that is the great misnomer of the likes of Richard Dawkins – but why, why are we, why is anything around us, here at all. That is why creation is more than simply a story in the biblical text; creation is at the core of wisdom literature. Creation is a theology all of its own.

Think, for example, of Job. When Job questions the nature of his existence, all that has befallen him, God answers Job out of the whirlwind. But what does God say? Does God recount the miracles performed for the Israelites in coming out of Egypt? Does God comfort Job with allusions to Job's piety and his special place in God's heart? No, God demands that Job acknowledge that God is creator: Behold now Behemoth, which I made like I made you; he eats grass like an ox./Behold now, his strength is in his loins, and his force is in the muscles of his belly./He stiffens his tail like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are knit together./ His bones are like tubes of bronze; his limbs are like bars of iron./He is the beginning of the ways of God ...(Job 40: 15-19). God is the creator, beware.

And creation is unique among the miraculous acts of God, for creation represents the extraordinary that masquerades as the ordinary. The existence of the world is the most ordinary thing in the world – it is the most fundamental thing which we take for granted – and yet it is truly extraordinary, without it we, our children, nothing at all exists. Why was the world made? Because God desired more than merely God's own existence. God desired the world of the ordinary, which could only be brought into existence through the extraordinary. And how extraordinary the world and our existence in it is!

We know this to be the case whenever we reflect for even the briefest moments on our own lives. We, too, have the power to experience the extraordinary within the ordinary. Anyone who has ever been a parent or a child will know that the act of reproduction, one the most fundamental, ordinary experiences of life everywhere, is also the most extraordinary. Perhaps that is why when God creates human beings, God imbues us with one particular element of צלם אלהים, the image of God – the qualities of maleness and femaleness. Human beings reflect God best when we are fully aware of our genders – and not merely for the act of reproduction, but also so that the humanness of those of us whose gender identity is outside the mainstream will never, in the words of Judith Butler, 'come into question.'

For the biblical text the pinnacle of creation is human beings. Why? Another good question. Why were human beings created? Perhaps because even in the extraordinary world which God created, God still found God's self without proper company. God was still lonely, even wandering in Eden. And here, too, James Weldon Johnson is informative. Johnson plays on our own desires for companionship, for closeness, for parental love. God looks around at all that God has created and says, 'I'm lonely still.'

Then God sat down --
On the side of a hill where he could think;

By a deep, wide river he sat down;
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

It is the most extraordinary, miraculous moment in all of written human history. God breathed into that first human being the breath of life and each of us became a living soul. In that moment of creation, each of us was granted access to the extraordinary in everyday life. Grasp it while you can.

Why was the world made? So that God would not be lonely, so that the extraordinary would always dwell in the ordinary, so that through the ordinariness of life, we would have access to God whenever we choose. Cleave to God, to the extraordinary, whenever you can. Amen.
Amen.