

Sermon: Year C, Proper 9
Texts: Isaiah 66:10-16
Galatians 6:14-18
Luke 10:1-12, 16-20

What is the difference between creation and invention? Most of us probably use these two words interchangeably. Inventors are creative, we say. Creativity is a kind of inventiveness. Both terms announce something new. Yet, according to the British scholar, George Steiner, creation is fundamentally different than invention, and he contends that over the course of the last several centuries we have, in fact, methodically exalted invention, as, with equal force, albeit very quietly, we have discredited creation – a shift that has not been without its effects for both good and ill. Steiner’s question, posed now at the beginning of our digital age, is what would it mean if we finally conceded that the concept of creation is entirely misbegotten, and therefore what would it mean if we agreed that all our real hope rests only in invention? How would this change our way of living and how, for us, would it change our way of reading someone like Saint Paul? Would it be possible to strain any lasting message from someone who, with unqualified assertion, leveraged his whole life and existence on creation instead. The difference between creation and invention may seem slight, but sometimes God *is* in the details, and this morning I’d like to look a little more closely at what this difference might render.

Thomas Edison famously noted about invention that its genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. That’s a good picture to keep in mind. Invention is digging around and rearranging. It’s exploring how the world works and, after gaining understanding, reconfiguring it into something new. Ben Franklin didn’t create electricity. He merely discovered something about its properties. And, in a proper sense, Edison didn’t create the light bulb. By pressing his understanding of how electricity emits light, he manufactured the bulb, using common materials in new ways. Especially after Edison, invention has become ever increasingly the chief work of our modern age. Examination leads to discovery. Discovery sparks new theory and better understanding. Better understanding leads to new possibilities. And, after much trial and error, this focus and energy results in advancements, the invention of new things, drawn from out of what has always been – innovations that have simply waited upon the development of our skill.

The measure of our hope in this process is that we fund this work almost without limit. With unprecedented trust, we accept almost any technological promise we hear. Nothing really seems out of bounds. Mention a current problem or an impending crisis, and, chances are, someone will offer in return an inventive solution or the confidence that our ability to innovate will outpace any looming disaster. The world may be a closed system, but it progresses with continuous evolution, and we, by invention, may accelerate this progress for our delight and our betterment – or for our survival.

In contrast, creation, according to Steiner, retains a mystical and inscrutable quality. Creation isn’t rearrangement. It springs from nothing with absolute freedom – *ex nihilo*. It surprises and, even in hindsight, seems unpredictable. Suddenly there is something where before all was empty and dark. Creation isn’t development. It’s origin, a beginning without prior rules that determine what can be. It leaves open the possibility of anything. This, at very least, is the sense of creation offered in the Bible – creation not as an alternative explanation of the world’s evolving or as a form of bad science, but as an unexplainable gift, to which no strings attach. The cosmos was not invented. It would be odd to speak in this way. It was, rather, as we say, called into being – a phrase that is powerfully descriptive but remains stubbornly ambiguous. Creation is not definable. It can’t be forced. It isn’t limited to any set of regulations. Rather, creation abounds, and thus, it presents itself as the very

opposite of Edison's inventiveness. It's 99% inspiration, that seems to require very little sweat at all – and something more like passion or love.

Made in the image of God, we know at least intimations of this creativity. We experience it when, inexplicably, we are able to act for the good, without stalling to calculate first the cost or the deservedness of those to whom the gift is offered. We can be sparked to do something beautifully out of character or completely beyond ken. From out of many kinds of nothingness, we, too, are capable of creating something completely original, not marred or dragged down by old issues and problems. A different sense of life springs from this trust, and much of what we have preserved in art and literature, Steiner claims, displays precisely this.

To our contemporary eyes, however, this understanding of creation has paled in comparison to the dazzling products of our invention. Just last month, thousands of people stood in line for days on end, braving the elements and fatigue, discomfort and hunger, just to be the first to own the new iPhone – which will be no different from the phones that will be available next month, which will soon enough be surpassed by the next generation of cell phones, promising more. Here, as with so many other tools and toys, the fantastic, material newness of our cascading inventions makes our perception of a less tangible creation seem arcane and fragile.

And yet, for as astonishing as all our feats of invention appear, there remains behind them, still, a discernable resignation. Information becomes more available. Communication is faster. Many of our problems become more manageable. But our personal nature is barely touched. Material advances have not made us more generous or less cruel. No inventions have helped us build the perfect character, no longer susceptible to jealousy or eager for another's downfall. The same old human traits prevail, the old divisions of anger and war, of resentment and bitterness. The ancient tensions between those who are favored and those who are downtrodden have not disappeared. We feverishly divide ourselves still: some are hip, some, woefully, are not. Some are chosen. Others aren't. The lucky survive. The unlucky die away without pity. And all our invention makes no difference whatsoever.

This is where Paul's reference to creation is most poignant, for he urges us to locate creation's strength exactly where, in invention, we are least able. Paul was insistent: the new creation, made manifest in Jesus' death and resurrection, obliterates the very distinctions within us that have proven to be immutable, despite all our progress. "For neither circumcision counts for anything," he said, "nor uncircumcision." This single phrase erases the division that had divided the world since the call of Abraham. There is now no Jew nor Gentile, nor are some elected as others are rejected. There is neither in nor out, slave nor free, the loved and the despised. All these distinctions come to nothing because in Jesus the world itself has been re-created. Even the breach between good and evil has been repaired. Reward and condemnation have both been replaced by forgiveness. Tribal Israel has been transformed into the Israel of God.

This is the newness of conversion – not whether one has claimed his or her own salvation and therefore stands on the right side of the ledger, but that God has already reconciled the world to himself and we are therefore free to live completely differently. Our character may be transformed into this very likeness of God. Where others feel compelled to act with grim duty, making accusations, harboring hatred, judging with alacrity, imposing justice by violence, as Christians we may declare that this is the world that has been crucified to us. We are no longer bound by this tragic struggle. Our word, our testimony, and the beauty of our lives is the triumph of grace that God has created as gift for all humankind and all the earth. This new creation, sprung from out of the nothingness of the death we imposed, is

God's abiding and God's abounding, inexplicably, in return for our spite: recreation at the heart of life, not invention all around it.

One of the great failures of the Church is that we are known, not for the redeeming newness we offer, surprising, mysterious, and glorious to all who witness it, but for the way we seem only to embody old rituals and stridently uphold musty, ancient mores. Pale and dour, the church attends to the creaky, rusted gates that, it presumes, lead to heaven, while, whistling, most of the world walks on by, iPods in their ears. The Gospel, however, is not a tradition or a rule. It is resurrection as the very culmination of creation. It is the newness of new creation, which, even amid the great flood of invention, is able to surprise the world with its brightness.

When was the last time the church stunned the world by its embrace, its sheer joy, its offering of re-creation as a gift rather than a threat? We should be of such character that people would choose to stand in line for days to share in the newness of Christ's creation. This is what God offers us and this is what God offers all the world by means of our lives. Something more sublime than all invention.

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