

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

June 11, 2023

# Spoken into Creation

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: June 15, 2023

“When God began to create ...”

These first words in the Hebrew portion of our Bible introduce us to the main character of the Bible, God.

“When God began to create” conceives of the moment God began to create time and space.

Handed down over the ages, the familiarity of this phrase, almost overshadows just how gutsy its claim is. This story imagines a time before time existed and presumes to describe God speaking into an emptiness, which no one could have heard, or even witnessed with jaw-dropping awe.

The writers of this story never intended to pinpoint exactly when, or where creation began. Rather than let our frivolous desire to measure and contain the truth, their prose reorients us with a rhythm we grasp as easily today as centuries ago with poetic structure and crescendo as God speaks and speaks ...

They embed energy in the forward motion with the word “and” joining one sweep of creation to another. It bursts with potential as God hurls light into heavens and seeds of creation with a blessing.

Scholars claim that poets wrote this opening story while languishing in captivity about the sixth century BCE. Among

the myriad creation stories in our scripture and the Ancient Near East, it is certainly not the oldest creation story.

After the Babylonian army slaughtered the Israelite people and threw them from their homes, the surviving exiles sought to preserve their memories of family and tribe, of a time of tranquility when they flourished and the land prospered, and in the process, they remembered God's goodness.

While in exile they shared the stories of ordinary people who grew into a great nation so that maybe, just maybe, remembering they would learn to place God once again at the center of their lives.

They stitched into scrolls of Genesis memories of God promising new life from almost dead parents. Of illegal immigrants, victims of sexual abuse, and don't shy away from estranged families bickering and reuniting.

When you think it is all a hot mess, justice and mercy shape the finales, especially when the heroes fall short. However improbable they appear; the stories are real with the certainties of God's love for all of God's people.

They remembered these stories while in captivity, and fed epic tales from other cultures of the origin of creation. Fierce battles between sea monsters. And these deities were fickle. According to the Babylonian myth, gods created humans, or at least some of them did. These deities would battle, kill, enslave

and retaliate against each other, and humans were often caught in the midst of these disputes.

Other myths imagined the movement of the planets in the heavens manipulating humans for their folly and own aggression against other planets.

Against an ethos of violence and evil, against the notion that humans are merely pawns, subject to the whims of planets, the poets remembered the divine presence that pervaded all their stories and imagined God's initial breath.

If they remembered their origin, they could reclaim their rightful place in God's grand story, and ultimate destiny.

Before I read portions of this epic poem they stitched into the opening of Genesis, please pray with me.

*Teach us your ways, creator God,  
that we may come out of our walls of isolation  
and be open to the same spirit  
who moved over the face of the waters in the first day of creation.  
Teach us your ways, transcendent God  
that we may feel your breath, speaking truth into our lives today  
and imagine what you may create in us today. Amen.*

### **Genesis 1:1-2:4**

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup>the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of

the deep and God's breath hovering over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

<sup>6</sup>And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." <sup>7</sup>So God made the dome and separated the waters. And it was so. <sup>8</sup>God called the dome heavens. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

<sup>8</sup>God called the dome heavens. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. <sup>9</sup>And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so ... And God saw that it was good. <sup>11</sup>And God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so ... And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

<sup>14</sup>And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, <sup>15</sup>and let them be lights in the dome of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. <sup>16</sup>God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the



night—and the stars ... And God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

<sup>20</sup> And God said, “Let the waters swarm with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” ...And God saw that it was good. <sup>22</sup> God blessed them... <sup>23</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

<sup>24</sup> And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so...And God saw that it was good. <sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

<sup>27</sup> So God created humans in God’s image...

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply... And it was so ...” <sup>31</sup> God saw everything created, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their multitude.

<sup>2</sup> On the sixth day God finished the work that God had done, and rested on the seventh day from all the work. <sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it ...God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.

<sup>4</sup>These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

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Two young fish swimming along, happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swims on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and asks “What the heck is water?”

The late, David Foster Wallace wrote that parable-like story. True to his craft as a writer, he uses a fish story to point out that the important realities of life – the ideas, the conventions, the expectations, the limits – are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.

And, yet in the day-to-day trenches, these ideas constructed by others and the imagined limits that surround us as surely as the air we breathe can have life-or-death consequences.

Step one notice. Not easy, but notice. Once we grasp that there are alternatives to “the way things are,” Wallace then pushes further with another story to prod us to consider why we choose to think one way and not another.

Our choices shape the consequences for our life and the lives of others. To show this, Wallace tells another story:

There are these two guys sitting together in a bar in the remote Alaskan wilderness. One of the guys is religious, the other is an atheist, and the two are arguing about the existence of God with that special intensity that comes after about the fourth beer.

And the atheist says: “Look, it’s not like I don’t have actual reasons for not believing in God. It’s not like I haven’t ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and I couldn’t see a thing, and it was 50 below, and so I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out ‘Oh, God, if there is a God, I’m lost in this blizzard, and I’m gonna die if you don’t help me.’”

And now, in the bar, the religious guy looks at the atheist all puzzled. “Well then you must believe now,” he says, “After all, here you are, alive.” The atheist just rolls his eyes. “No, man, all that was, was a couple Eskimos happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp.”<sup>1</sup>

These two men see the same sequence of events and extract two differing meanings. Both are plausible explanations but lead to widely divergent ways of living in the world. The point

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, “This is Water,” *David Foster Wallace*, accessed June 7, 2023, <https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>

at which they differ comes from inside of the men, their basic orientation towards their place in the world.

Is it based upon arrogance? Places humans at the center of the universe? Battling for control? Or, does humility and reverence for God lead you to trust that even in the harshest climate and to the most skeptical, God's hand remains present? The stories we tell ourselves and teach our children shape our understanding of what and who we become.

Like the biblical writers, we swim in the waters of stories that encourages us to slap labels on ourselves and others. The daily barrage of news stories of violence, authorize more violence, isolate us from one another with fear, and incite a quest to control.

Our origin story, this bold rebuttal written to confront those dominant and deadly values at the time, remains the polestar to guide us through the hate and violence and divisiveness we experience today.

The God we worship gave of God's self to create light and the lights of heaven. The God of love poured out an image of God's own self into the human one, seeding to create more of this inherent goodness.

When we make a mess, God, ever disrupting our selfishness, took on human flesh to show us how to restore creation, in daily life, not in some fantasy future, by what we do and say.

Let me close with a story of my experience at the Pittsburgh airport this past week in the wee hours of the morning.

I accompanied my dad to get checked-in for his return flight to Florida. At one time, he was a road warrior, traveling through airports weekly. This stubborn guy refused my offer to accompany him to gate B44.

As we approached the escalator to get to the security line, I offer to get a transport. Again, “no!” Did I mention my dad is stubborn.

Just as we reach the escalator, another woman with her elderly companion overhears us. She invites us to step on first.

As we descend together, she says to my dad, “hey, don’t I know you? You live at the marina and have coffee with the guys in the morning.”

My dad’s taken aback. “Yes.”

“You go to the Presbyterian church there as well. I thought I saw you this past Easter.”

I’m bursting inside as he says, “well, yes.”

“Do you mind if we walk with you to the gate? We too are returning to the marina.”

Then she pulls me aside, offers her name, “Heather,” and asks for my dad’s name. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure we get there, together.

Our story from Genesis invites us to reclaim the potential goodness in each of us, to see God’s image in the other, to be that goodness to one another.

It starts one day at a time, one encounter at a time. We get to write our story in God’s grand plan with what we speak and what we do.





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