

Who Do Our Creation Stories Say We Are?
Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a

A sermon by Meighan Pritchard
Prospect United Church of Christ
Seattle, WA June 11, 2017

I.

You, my fellow Jews, have been in exile in Babylon for some time now. It has been some years since we and our families were hauled away from Judea, from the rest of our people, from our Temple in Jerusalem where we came every year to worship God with prayers and sacrifices according to our ancient customs. We knew who we were there. We knew who our God was, what God expected of us. We knew that God saw us and loved us.

But now we live in a foreign land, and our lives are not in our control. Our children are learning a different language, different customs. They want to intermarry with Babylonians. They do not remember the old ways. They do not know our God. They are told the Babylonian stories and learn about the Babylonian gods. They are told that the mother god, Tiamat, was slain in battle when a strong wind blew so hard that she could not close her mouth. Another god shot an arrow down her throat and killed her, then dismembered her, so that part of her body was used to form the sun and the stars, and part of it became the seas. And the humans were created as slave labor to do all the work so the gods could relax.

Such a violent origin story. Such a violent people, these Babylonians. Such chaotic times in which we live. So far from our Temple in Jerusalem, do we even know if our God can find us here in exile? So far from our homeland and the rest of our people, will we be able to retain any sense of what it means to be a people distinct from our captors? Will our children and grandchildren even know what it means to be a Jew?

So we have decided to write down our stories, in case they might be forgotten. I know, they have always been handed down as part of an oral tradition. But these are drastic times, and we are not sure the oral traditions will survive without some help. Our children and grandchildren need to know who they are, who their God is, where they come from. Only then will they know who they can be going forward.

Let me remind you, therefore, that our creation story is not about the slaying of Tiamat or any other god. It is not a violent story but rather a love song. Hear it again, and know who you are.

First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see. [This excerpt and the two that follow are from Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2002), Gen 1.)

Not just Judea, not just Israel. Not just Jerusalem. *All* the heavens and earth. Do you think a God who created everywhere will know how to find us, even when we cannot find our way to the Temple? Yes. Our God is a god of everywhere.

Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

It is not an accident that our Hebrew word for watery abyss, *tehom*, sounds similar to the word for the Babylonian god Tiamat, whose body became the seas. The watery abyss is chaos, the depths of darkness and unformed anything. Perhaps you know a piece of this chaos in the depths of your own soul. And yet, even there, even in the watery abyss, God's Spirit is present. Do you think God's Spirit is present in the chaos of our lives today? Yes. It continues to breathe over all the chaos and din of our lives, to be present even in our darkest, most out of control days.

God spoke: "Light!"
And light appeared.

God saw that light was good
and separated light from dark.
God named the light Day,
and the dark Night.
It was evening, it was morning—
Day One.

You know this story. Listen to the rhythm and order in its very structure: God speaks everything into being in turn: light, sky, waters above, waters below, earth, plants, lights in the sky, seasons and days and years, fish, birds, animals. God made humans last of all. God calls each of these into being in turn, in sequence. And God calls everything good. This is the rhythm of our creation story—not violent, but a love song from God for all that is created. And there is evening, and there is morning, each day of the week.

Is this not all still true, even here in exile? Night follows day, light follows dark, seasons and years flow in order. We speak of the great light in the sky for day and the lesser light for night, but in our story we do not name them sun and moon because we do not want to evoke other civilizations' gods of sun and moon. We do not have gods of the sun and moon, only our one God, who created these lights in the sky. But wherever we are, the sun and moon are there, too, reminders of the God who created them and put them there.

Notice what is missing from this creation story. There is no mention of sin, guilt, anger, temptation, fear, betrayal. There is no violence. This is a joyful creation story that shows God creating order out of chaos and then loving it, finding it beautiful, calling it—calling us—good. No matter what chaos we experience in this foreign land where we are not in control of our lives the way we would like, where we cannot worship in the place or manner we would like, our God is here with us, helping to create order out of chaos, loving us, calling us good. How can this but help us to endure, to persevere with patience and love, to make the best out of this situation, to keep worshipping God whenever and wherever we

can, Temple or no? Therefore we must teach our children these stories of our people so that they know who they are and whose they are. This is important, not just so we can hang onto the past, but so we can make sense of the present—put it into some kind of order—and find our way forward to the future as beloved members of God’s creation.

II.

Another creation story. [This section draws on Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 3-5.]

She fell like a maple seed, pirouetting on an autumn breeze. A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before. It took her a long time to fall. In fear, or maybe hope, she clutched a bundle tightly in her hand.

Hurling downward, she saw only dark water below. But in that emptiness there were many eyes gazing up at the sudden shaft of light. They saw there a small object, a mere dust mote in the beam. As it grew closer, they could see that it was a woman, arms outstretched, long black hair billowing behind as she spiraled toward them.

The geese nodded at one another and rose together from the water in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath to break her fall. Far from the only home she’d ever known, she caught her breath at the warm embrace of soft feathers as they gently carried her downward. And so it began.

This is how Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of *Braiding Sweetgrass* and enrolled member of the Potawatomi Nation, writes down a creation story adapted from oral tradition of the tribes around the Great Lakes. The animals set Skywoman on Turtle’s back, and they try to bring up some mud from the bottom of the water so that Skywoman can have some solid ground on which to stand. Many try and fail, for it is too deep. Finally Muskrat dives down.

His small legs flailed as he worked his way downward and he was gone a very long time.

They waited and waited for him to return, fearing the worst for their relative, and, before long, a stream of bubbles rose with the small, limp body of the muskrat. He had given his life to aid this helpless human. But then the others noticed that his paw was tightly clenched and, when they opened it, there was a small handful of mud. Turtle said, “Here, put it on my back and I will hold it.”

Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle’s back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals’ gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home.

Like any good guest, Skywoman had not come empty-handed. The bundle was still clutched in her hand. When she toppled from the hole in the Skyworld she had reached out to grab onto the Tree of Life that grew there. In her grasp were branches—fruits and seeds of all kinds of plants. These she scattered onto the new ground and carefully tended each one until the world turned from brown to green. Sunlight streamed through the hole from the Skyworld, allowing the seeds to flourish. Wild grasses, flowers, trees, and medicines spread everywhere. And now that the animals, too, had plenty to eat, many came to live with her on Turtle Island.

This is a creation story of cooperation, kinship with all animals, gratitude, singing, dancing the earth into being. Kimmerer writes, “Children hearing the Skywoman story from birth know in their bones the responsibility that flows between humans and the earth.... Images of

Skywoman speak not just of where we came from, but also of how we can go forward.”

III.

Yet another creation story.

Once upon a time, some billions of years ago, there was a Big Bang, and the universe was born. It has been expanding ever since. Out of this Big Bang came everything that we can see or feel or touch, including ourselves. Since Copernicus and Galileo, we have come to understand that the sun and stars do not rotate around us. In fact, quite the opposite: we on planet Earth rotate around the sun. Earth is but one planet in this solar system, and this solar system is just one of countless solar systems in countless galaxies.

Some who subscribe to this creation story over all others want to believe only in what can be measured and recorded. Their definition of what is true is what is factual. They do not find room for God or a story about God creating the world in seven days, because they know that creation of Earth took much longer than seven days. That is a fact. They do not give credence to a story of Skywoman and the animals dancing the earth into being with gratitude. They do practice awe of creation on a regular basis, and they are on an eternal quest to understand it better.

There are many, many creation stories. Some are factual. Some are true, even if they didn't happen exactly the way the story is told—they are true on a profound spiritual level. Our creation stories tell us where we have been, who we are now, and how we might move forward. They give us a sense of identity and belonging in a long trajectory through time. They help us to see beyond our own present chaos, to look at a bigger picture of the Story of Us and the small part we can contribute. Such stories can comfort and connect us, remind us of our best selves, call us to create, sing, dance, explore, ask questions, tend our gardens—because, oh yes, Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, that's another creation story.

So I invite us to be intentional about remembering our origin stories. Look for that Spirit that God sends out over the deep watery chaos or into the chaos of our own day-to-day lives. Find God in the sun and moon, night and day, plants and animals, for they are all sacred, and God has called them all good. Dance with gratitude in such a way as to call the earth into being in connection with all the animals. Research the stars and planets, the cells and atoms of creation, and know that there is indeed more to this world than our telescopes or microscopes will ever reveal—but these tools can help us to care for creation as well.

We are sacred beings created by a loving God, called to create, called to love, called to connect with each other, with God, and with all of creation. May we find great joy, great meaning, and great spiritual presence in doing so. May we listen for that still-speaking, still-creating God so that we may find our way forward as loving, grateful stewards of this fragile, blessed Earth. Amen.