

## “The Sanctity of Space”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Genesis 1:-2:4

July 7, 2019 - Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Our second reading this morning is the first of the two creation stories in the book of Genesis. Stories like this one were first written down during the Babylonian Exile of the 6th Century B.C. So as we hear this account of the beginning, I'll ask you to indulge me and imagine that we are exiles, far from home, seeking to make the best of it as strangers in a strange land. It is nighttime, and the sky above is a dark blanket filled with stars. We sit in front of a fire and one of the older children asks for the story of how the world came to be. And so we share the tale as it was told to us.

Listen now for the Word of God:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then 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. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

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. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

God saw everything that God had made, 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. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This story is sacred poetry. Some hear the pattern of a worship litany in it. What it is not, emphatically, is a science textbook. It was never meant to be taken literally. If it had been, surely somebody along the way would have chosen either this story or the one that follows, with its completely different account of how God went about making everything, that one starting with a human.

Rather, this beautiful tale of God calling forth all the pieces of creation and declaring them to be good is meant to be a holy meditation on the day and night, the majesty of the sky, the question uttered at the break of dawn or as a comet swung by — How is this all possible? It is a story of the goodness of God, the power of the almighty, the creativity of the Holy One, the presence from the very beginning of the God of the covenant. It is a lesson about the brilliance of what we have been given and the duty to treat it with awe and to treasure it all as a gift.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was *tohu wa-bohu* and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God *merahefet* over the face of the waters.”

We’ve got some ancient, elemental, tricky Hebrew in that sentence. The earth was *tohu wa-bohu* -

“watery waste” or “confusion” or “a simmering stew of darkness” or “chaos.” Pick your favorite attempt to capture the phrase, but it seems to suggest something more than a blank slate. It’s got potential energy — power to cause trouble or threaten or act up. And then the verb for what the wind from God does is rare as well and could be rendered “hover,” “flutter,” or “move.”<sup>1</sup>

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a watery stew of threatening chaos and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God fluttered over the face of the waters.*

The universe can go in millions of different directions at this point, with God’s Spirit calculating the permutations as it flutters. This is a story of chaos-abatement for an exiled people emphatically not in control of their future. It tells of their God being fully in control of the past, all the way from the very beginning, and thus a God they can trust going forward. For God chooses order and a universe with boundaries that create life.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.”

This dome business perplexes the modern ear, but I love how scholar Karla Sumoala describes it. She says, “God [is] blowing a bubble in the midst of the watery chaos. Once the bubble is in place, life can develop in an orderly and systematic way.” Inside the bubble-dome is water that recedes to reveal land, and life springs forth from the water and the land inside the bubble. Outside the bubble-dome is a different water — the chaos water that is separate from us. God has set up the bubble-dome — the sky, the firmament — to keep chaos at bay. It surrounds, but doesn’t pierce the dome.<sup>2</sup>

The out-of-our-control is all around, but God is firmly in charge. So we, in exile or under oppression or despairing or adrift, we can trust this eternal God who has rigged up the cosmos. When the world seems heavy, we can stare up in wonder at the bright lights in the dome and dream of a future where order is restored. We can see the moon in its phases and the planets drop by for visits and know that time does not stand still, not for us, not for those who claim to rule, be they conquerors or emperors or presidents. The firmament is swirling and when we look up the weight of our struggles can melt away as we are dazzled by wonder.

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Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson went camping. They pitched their tent under the stars and went to sleep. In the middle of the night Holmes woke Watson up: “Watson, look up at the stars, and tell me what you deduce.”

Watson thought for just a moment, and replied: “I see millions of stars and even if a few of those have planets, it’s quite likely there are some planets like Earth, and if there are a few planets like Earth out there, there might also be life.”

Holmes struck a match to light his pipe. “Watson, you fool, somebody has stolen our tent!”

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary by Karla Suomala at [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4037](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4037)

<sup>2</sup> Suomala

When Abraham wants to know about the promise of descendants, God shows him the stars. Throughout our scriptures people go up on mountains to speak to and to encounter God. Moses. Elijah. Jesus. The dream of flying comes through ancient kites to the story of Daedalus and Icarus and other mythologies into the sketches of Leonardo da Vinci and the balloons, gliders, airships and fantastic flying machines of the 19th Century to the early 20th Century success of the Wright brothers and so many other aviators. We have looked to the sky and yearned to ascend, to have dominion over the dome as well. And eventually, to burst through it to new possibilities. We have overcome gravity to circle the earth, and then to orbit it. Nearly fifty years ago we finally went and paid a visit to the nearest of those celestial orbs. Time does not stand still, and now neither do we.

Our world has expanded, not only because we can now see so far beyond our wondering eyes with incredible telescopes or because we know more about the science of the birth of the universe because of the probes we send deep into space, but because we can get from New York to Moscow in under ten hours. We are connected to the children of God around the globe and can learn of their innovations and their struggles instantaneously. Thanks be to God for NASA, which has brought us new technology in medicine and public safety and environmental resources and agriculture and food safety and industrial productivity and computer systems and all sorts of stuff for the home.

Of course, there have been downsides to liftoff too. We figured out how to fly, and we immediately figured out how to use flight to kill. Some of this technology has been used to harm and to consolidate power and to exponentially expand our ability to destroy one another and our planet. Along with truly inspired innovation has come the poison of confusion and chaos.

We're celebrating this moon landing anniversary, but this congregation isn't much for overly-sentimental, potentially toxic nostalgia.

So we give thanks to God for incredible brains and courageous people, like Presbyterian elder Katherine Johnson. Johnson, now 100, was a NASA mathematician and aerospace technologist from 1953–1986. Her work influenced every major space program from the Mercury launches through the space shuttle era, particularly that Apollo 11 mission and with on-the-fly computations that enabled the Apollo 13 astronauts to return safely home from space. On Sundays, she sang in the choir at Carver Presbyterian in Newport News, Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

And as we give thanks for those who worked miracles, we also look ahead and wonder how we will seek to protect the goodness God has given us through space-age wonders and the sacred math of engineers. When generations beyond us look to the sky, will they see a watery wasteland, or a wind from God fluttering across the face of the earth?

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John Gillespie Magee, Jr., had a British mom and an American dad who was an Episcopal priest. John joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in October of 1940, was trained as a pilot, and was sent to the British Isles, where he escorted bombers on raids. He was killed in a mid-air collision over England in December of 1941. In a letter he sent his parents just three months earlier, he enclosed a poem that he wrote, inspired by other poems he loved.

The poem, titled "High Flight," has become a favorite of pilots and astronauts and you've likely heard at least part of it. You can read it on headstones at Arlington National Cemetery. Michael Collins

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<sup>3</sup> "Real life 'Hidden Figures' mathematician is longtime Presbyterian" in Presbyterian Outlook, January 10, 20178

brought it with him on his Gemini 10 flight in 1968. President Reagan quoted from it after the Challenger disaster in 1986. And back when television stations signed off for the night, some used the poem to say goodnight. When I read it, I think of the dome, and the light, and God's gifts of ingenuity and appreciation for boundless beauty, and I offer it to you as a prayer to close this sermon:

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air....

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace.  
Where never lark, or even eagle flew —  
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
— Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Amen.