

“Good Creation”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Genesis 1:1-2:4a
September 10, 2017 - Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

It feels like creation is being undone. Recovery work from Hurricane Harvey begins. Irma is upon our nation, and yet more hurricanes whirl and churn in the Atlantic. A catastrophic earthquake hits Mexico. Wildfires rage in the American West. The upper Indian Ocean is seeing the worst monsoon season in decades. Antarctic ice breaks free.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was *tohu wa-bohu*” — a formless void. Desolation. Confusion. A wasteland. A simmering stew of darkness. Chaos. It always catches me, that this story in Genesis isn’t about God creating matter out of *thin... nothing*. God is creating by speaking to bring order to chaos and boundaries to mess and life and light to darkness.¹

This ancient story reads like a litany, with its *And God said*s and *Let there be*s and *It was good*s and its *There was evening and there was morning*s repeating rhythmically like choruses.

Author Neil Gaiman has a novel called *Anansi Boys*, and the story opens:

It begins, as most things begin, with a song. In the beginning, after all, were the words, and they came with a tune. That was how the world was made, how the void was divided, how the lands and the stars and the dreams and the little gods and the animals, how all of them came into the world. They were sung. The great beasts were sung into existence, after the Singer had done with the planets and the hills and the trees and the oceans and the lesser beasts. The cliffs that bound existence were sung, and the hunting grounds, and the dark. Songs remain. They last. The right song can turn an emperor into a laughingstock, can bring down dynasties. A song can last long after the events and the people in it are dust and dreams and gone. That's the power of songs.²

Decades earlier, C.S. Lewis, in his *Chronicles of Narnia* describes that magical lands’ creation:

“In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing...it seemed to come from all directions at once...Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune.”³

¹ Thanks to the Rev. Michael Kirby for inspiration here

² Neil Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*

In the beginning was *tohu wa-Bohu* — In the beginning was the Word, and the God of Israel spoke that word into the chaos. Out of some holy yearning, God sung creation into the mess, bringing about something utterly different, uttering words of love and relationship and action into a universe bent on destruction. God spoke life, and it was so good. And chaos took a whipping.

This tale of creation is not an ending, but a beginning. There is much more to the story, including chaos charging back time and time again. But even before that, creation is not done in these six days. This chapter tells of creation beginning, but the real work of creating is everything that happens afterward. God has set creation and life free to do what it will.

Back in Narnia, C.S. Lewis has Aslan the Lion, the divine figure, revealed as the one singing everything into creation: “Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters.”

In this, the first of two very different creation stories in Genesis, God speaks and creates, but God is not the only one creating. God says “Let the earth put forth vegetation” and “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures” and “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind.” And then the text says that the earth and the waters did that bringing forth. And God tells all those creatures — those created ones — to be fruitful and get creating.

God chooses not to do the creation of this world alone. This creation is dependent upon those that creep upon the earth co-creating with their God.

It’s helpful to note who put this lyrical story in print. Much of the Hebrew Scriptures was written down during the Babylonian Exile. That’s three generations spent under foreign rule, removed from the land. Even upon return, there was chaos. Great Babylon fell and the Persians took over. Overlords are defeating overlords and you don’t know home and everything feels very *tohu wa-bohu*. When you gather for worship, there are times that it is hard to hold on, to remember that the God of Israel’s steadfast love endures forever. And so the question on your lips is not, perhaps, “How do the physics of the universe work?” but instead “Where did we come from?” Or maybe “Should we give up on this God?”

And the response to those questions comes: ““In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was *tohu wa-bohu*” God brought order to the wasteland, created boundaries to keep the chaos at bay, and it was good. And God needs you — yes, you — to be God’s people and to create and bring forth life. Children of God, in our Lord’s creative Word, you have a role to play, lines to speak. It matters how you live as a creature. It matters how you create. It matters how you live the life that has been spoken into being. Be children of God. Think. Love. Speak. Encounter.

We have a job to do in God’s good creation. Chaos fights back as winds swirl and rains fall, and we respond with engineering and courage and dollars and supplies and muddy feet and doors

flung open to house evacuees and hands ready to rebuild.

It feels like creation is being undone — by us. The void wasteland threatens to overwhelm us as we destroy the very waters and earth and sky, to undo this beautiful creation. I think about the co-creators in our midst. Co-creators like Susan Hammack, who brings forth plants of such variety seemingly wherever she goes, including the church grounds. Or Kathy Silvie, who, I am certain will find time to recycle while she's hosting family fleeing Hurricane Irma. Or Bill Woodruff, who has tender love for the creepy crawly creatures that give me the willies.

This is the only creation we've got, and as co-creators we've got to make sure it doesn't return to *tohu wa-bohu*. This afternoon, I will ask our church Session to take steps toward making EPC a certified PC(USA) Earth Care Congregation. That means that in our worship, education, outreach, and facilities, we will take steps to actively be good stewards of God's creation. We'll be creating an Earth Care Team — so look out for news about that and, of course, if you'd like to be involved in these initial steps, let me know.

The *tohu wa-bohu* feeling isn't limited to weather and the environment, and neither is our responsibility to creation. On almost every day of this creation story, we hear “And God saw that it was good.” We don't get that line on the second day, and I can only imagine that's because it was a Monday. On the sixth day, God looks at everything “and indeed, it was very good.”

Now, we know things are about to go off the rails, and creation will start misbehaving. But through God's eyes, in its creation, nothing that was spoken into being was described as “foreign” or “alien” or “illegal.” Those are our terms. All of creation is beloved by God. We don't hear, “And God saw that they didn't have their papers...”

This past Wednesday, Parish Associate Lydia Casey and I sat in front of the student center at UAB and heard these beautifully painful stories of young adults who, as children, were brought to this country. Their land, their story, their existence are all rooted in, of all places on this globe, Alabama. They are afraid for their future and for their parents and for their nieces and nephews. There's not a great English word for the tears that rolled down their faces as they told how hard they worked to get straight A's and how panicked they feel now. But there's a good Hebrew phrase: *tohu wa-bohu*.

We Christians are people of the Word — and that Word is Christ. Christ, the companion of the lost, the brokenhearted, the overlooked, the cast-aside. Christ, the breaker of bread with the broken and the brokenhearted, the forsaken and the marginalized. In the beginning was that Word, with God.

I returned last night from a very quick trip to Chicago to participate in the bris for the son of my dearest friend. The ancient circumcision ritual is chock full of prayers that could melt the hardest heart. In that room with his loving family and photos of long-gone relatives and a single candle burning, there was for a brief few minutes, even with an infant, no sense of chaos at all, but of a

sacred and age-old order.

I had the privilege of holding little eight-day-old Finn and sitting in the chair of Elijah as we prayed together for this tiny little creation's life:

May you see your world fulfilled in your lifetime,
And may the future world hold a place for you,
May your hope last from generation to generation,
Your heart express understanding,
Your mouth speak wisdom,
And your tongue bring forth song;
May your gaze look straight before you,
May your eyes be enlightened by the light of Torah,
And your face shine like the brightness of the heavens;
May your lips utter knowledge,
Your being rejoice in goodness,
And your steps run to hear the words of your heritage. Amen.