

What God Does: Creating

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Genesis 1:1-5
on January 7, 2018 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

If you were to walk into the front door of my house and look up, you would see a sign hanging there above the threshold. Given to Josh and me on the occasion of our wedding by my oldest friend, Anna, with whom I have shared a life of friendship. The sign atop the door says this: "home is where your story begins."

I love that saying — the reminder that what we do and cultivate within these walls creates for our family their origin story, their orientation, their grounding, the home from which they launch into the world. Every time I read it, I am reminded of the great privilege and the responsibility I carry to bring about and shape that home for Josh, Liam, Annabelle, Silas, and even Knox the dog. But as much as I resonate with that particular framework, I'm fooling myself and them if I think that's the end of the story; because I know that my story — our story — began before time and space and homes and clutter and responsibilities and tasks and families and lovers. Our story began and our home originated when God created.

Today marks the first day after the Feast of Epiphany, the day after Christians mark the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and that visit from the Magi which was guided by the light of the star. And on this first Sunday of Epiphany, we hear another revelation of God. The first

revelation, actually: the place and time where God's story — our story — begins. For in the beginning, there was God.

Starting here at the beginning, we'll explore together over these next five weeks this revelation of God that began in the genesis of the world. Through a series of stories in the Old Testament that the lectionary gives us during these winter weeks, we'll catch a glimpse into the character and nature of God, *learning who God is by what God does*. We'll read of God's calling and changing, God's challenging and comforting. But in the beginning, God was creating.

Those of us who have hung around churches and Christians for some time know this opening line of our story well: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." But what we might not know is that this classic translation isn't the only faithful possibility. Other translations of the Hebrew read: "In the beginning, when God created" or even "*when God began to create* the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void." The shade of difference these two translations offer from one another is about that beginning, right? Did God bring about the beginning, or was something already happening "when God began to create"? Either way you translate those opening words of the Bible, the dynamic tension between verses 1 and 2 remain.¹

¹ This was a profound learning of mine in divinity school! Credit given to Dr. Neal Walls as my Old Testament professor who opened up this text for me in transformative ways.

Because we learn in the second verse of scripture that the "earth was a formless void." (The Hebrew calls it *tohu wa-bohu*.) *Tohu wa-bohu* was understood to be a formless void, chaos and desolation, emptiness and nothingness, meaningless confusion, a wasteland of primordial soup... where "darkness covered the face of the deep." This canvas of chaos was where God began to act, a canvas God deems worthy of glorious creation.

And with a sweep of the Divine wind — the Hebrew *ruach*, that the Greeks later will call *spirit* — with that holy exhalation over the face of the waters, God got to work. **Creating, as Genesis describes it, involved summoning, separating, and assessing.** The pattern unfolds similarly throughout this first chapter of Genesis. **Summoning** with only a word, God called creation into being. "Let there be light." "Let there be a dome, let there be dry land and waters and living creatures, and humankind made in our image." Do you notice how the summons of God weren't mandates or orders? God did not say "Light, you better get out here or else! C'mon, dry land... hurry up!" But rather, God called forth creation from the chaos. It was all so intentional: creation did not just happen. It wasn't accidental or haphazard, but rather willful — every movement, every element, every shade of happening is crafted *on purpose* from the hands and the mouth of the creator.²

² Much of my interpretation of this passage stems from Walter Brueggemann incredibly insightful commentary in *Interpretation: Genesis*, p11-39.

After the summons comes the **separating**. Light from dark, day from night, water from sky, earth from seas, sun from the moon and stars, plants and seeds from birds and water creatures, cattle and creeping things from all humankind. By giving each created element its domain, God grants them freedom within constraint, setting right the space and place of things.

In all things, God pauses to **assess** and proclaims creation to be good, even when the raw material of those first days was nothing greater than a formless void. God does not hesitate to find goodness and purpose and meaning in the created world. The writer of Proverbs even reminds us that God created for the purpose of rejoicing and enjoyment.³ God could have remained alone with only the divine court to keep company, but instead God desired to create and then delighted in that which bore the creator's marks.

What does God do in creation? Summoning, separating, assessing. Or as scholar Walter Brueggemann sums up these opening words of scripture concisely: "Creator creates creation."⁴ In it, he acknowledges that there is an intimacy of relation between the one doing the creating, the act itself, and the thing that comes into being. The identity of the creator can't help but to be defined by the thing that is created. For like an artist with a hunk of clay or a canvas, some tubes of paint, and a fistful of

³ Proverbs 8:30-31.

⁴ Brueggemann, p17.

brushes, the creator and his or her creation are bound up with one another. Just as we understand Michelangelo as an artist through experiencing the intricately-detailed statue of David or the breathtaking ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, just as we discover Toni Morrison through her rich and evocative novels, just as we know Bob Dylan through his marriage of literary lyrics with reedy and raspy song, so too do we understand and discover and know God through that which God created. For God is an active artist, a creator filled with majestic movement to bring all things into being. *Because in the beginning, God chose to create.*

So I ask you today: what clues about our story does this give us as part of God's glorious creation? What does Genesis's account of creation tell us about God's role in beginnings, or how God perceives our messy, imperfect lives? How might we hear and heed a summons into the creative spirit of God in this new year? What might God be creating in you?

For in the beginning, might we remember that God's first action was to create?

In the beginning when we try to tell a certain story to ourselves, our social media feeds, our friends and colleagues, might we remember that our story actually begins as God takes chaos from which to create new life?

In the beginning when our lives feel more like that primordial soup of nothingness than the glorious image-bearers of the divine, might we

remember that our very first identity is as God's beloved children, created and blessed and pronounced to be good.

In the beginning when we struggle to see past the suffocating darkness that surrounds us, might we remember that it was precisely that scene in which God began to act?

In the beginning when our creative juices feel dry or depleted, might we remember that God took the racist of raw materials and fashioned that sunset so soft it could be liquid, that apple packed with crisp nourishment, the birdsong that lifts even the darkest spirit, the friend and fellow traveler on the road who makes the hardest seasons bearable?

That great Irish poet John O'Donahue tells a story about his neighbor, who years ago set out to build a new home. As he readied himself for the project, he knew the first step was to strip up the sod from his field so that he could begin digging out the foundation. He was out in his field doing just that one day, when the village's notable elder came by. The old man praised O'Donahue's neighbor, saying "you have the worst of it behind you now!" The neighbor laughed and said, "but I have only just begun," to which the old man replied, "that's just what I mean. You have begun; and to make a real beginning is the most difficult act."⁵

God's beginning was filled with creating, and on this first day of the season of Epiphany, when God's light that came in Christ shone into the

⁵ John O'Donahue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*, p3.

deepest night, might we take our cue from God and begin a new creation that bears the light of Christ into the world this year?

My dear friend Scott pointed out to me that in the text on the 7th day of creation unlike all the ones that preceded it, there's no repetition of the familiar refrain: "and there was evening and there was morning." He wonders: could it mean that we are still in that 7th day, and as God rests, we become the co-creators? Could the hard work have already passed, because in God, the story of our creative beginning has already begun?⁶

After he told the story about his neighbor, John O'Donahue offered a blessing for a new beginning that goes like this:

*In out-of-the way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.*

*For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.*

*It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the gray promises that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.*

*Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,*

⁶ Credit to dear friend Rev. Scott Dickison for this idea!

*Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.*

*Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.*

*Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.⁷*

That sounds like God to me. It sounds like a story worth telling this year. It sounds like a story of good news indeed. Amen.

⁷ O'Donahue, p14.