

June 7, 2020
We Belong to the Lord
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Genesis 1:1-2:4a

[Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath]

1 *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² 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. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

⁶ *And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷ 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. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.*

⁹ *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. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.*

¹⁴ *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, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.*

²⁰ *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.” ²¹ 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. ²² God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.*

²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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."

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,

in the image of God he created them;

male and female he created them.

²⁸ 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." ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

² Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Nature is not aware that there is such a thing as indoors and outdoors, which probably explains why there is a king snake living under the floor of the porch that I'm sitting on right now.

I visited India last fall and spent a few days with some friends who live in the far northeast state of Manipur, a startlingly beautiful place. It's a hot place too, and their house is built to catch every possible breeze. One day there was a lizard in my room. Not a tiny lizard. Not a komodo dragon. But a respectable lizard, all the same. I remained very calm and went to the sister in the family – a doctor. "Joshila," I tried to sound super calm, "hey, there's a lizard in my room and I'm just checking to see if we do anything about that." Equally matter-of-factly, she said, "Oh sure. We cohabitare." "Right," I said.

Even our notions of *indoors* and *outdoors* are culturally bound. Nature is not aware of it. Which is why there is a giant king snake living between my deck floor and my porch ceiling. The snake doesn't know she's not in the forest. My Indian friends told me she

has come as a protector of our house. They would even have a priestess or a priest come and interpret the message, maybe, that the snake was bringing. I haven't had anyone over to interpret its message, but I've decided to regard the snake as our protector. I talk to her sometimes when I sit out there, telling her I am glad she's here, and I offer her some Western insight about the idea of indoors and outdoors. Friends, if nothing else, Genesis chapter 1 ought to send us outside or at least to a window. To hang a birdfeeder. To situate our own existence within the context of so much life.

Come take a walk around my yard with me so I can show you some stuff. Is there anything prettier than a squash blossom? A blackberry blossom maybe. Or collard greens ready for harvest? How about flowering sage? Is there anything more amazing than putting a bean seed in the ground on May 25 and nine days later there is a tiny little plant with tiny little arms? And on the little arms are tiny little fingers that reach out and grab a string, so it can grow up and make hundreds and hundreds more bean seeds? Is there anything more hilarious than but also as efficient as chickens at their dust baths? They are scratching up the dust to coat their skin and feathers, so that mites and mosquitoes will not bite them.

It would be arrogant to show off one's own garden if I did anything to make it happen. But a gardener can't make a single flower grow. I can't make a single seed pop open. I can poke it in the ground, but I can't make it grow. I have columbine in my front flowerbed that I didn't even plant. The Bible doesn't tell us how it works – only that God is the Creator and all of us are the created. Bugs, beans, and human beings – our task is to learn to live here and to learn to pray.

Let's pray: *How we long to see you, O God, and to keep our safe and pretty world intact too. We long to know and be known Divinely, and yet we long not to be changed too much. We pray, O God, for the courage to let go of the life we have, to receive the life you have offered. This is our prayer. Amen.*

English struggles to translate Genesis 1:2, *when the Spirit of God was ALL that was; hovering like a wind over the watery abyss*; calling that time before time “*chaos and disorder.*” Our language for God, without us alongside God. In her work translating the Hebrew, Old Testament scholar Karla Suomala writes, *the universe was a watery chaos into which God blew a bubble.* Within the bubble is creation as we know it. The story was first told, then eventually written in Hebrew, by the people of Israel, hundreds and hundreds of years into their existence when they were exiles in Babylon. My seminary professor Jon Johnsson (he was Dutch, but he grew up in South Africa, so he had the most unusual and musical of accents) always said, “*If not for the exile, ladies and gentlemen, our Bible would read, ‘In the beginning God created Jerusalem.’*”

If not for exile, Israel might still have known themselves as the center of the universe. Exile taught them otherwise. And so they began the story of themselves: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*, the bubble in the watery abyss, and within the

bubble a sort of order: night, day, light and dark, land, sea, sky, plants, fish, birds, animals of every kind. And human beings finally – the caretakers of it all. Caretaking, we know, was supposed to mean hands off, *leaving well enough alone*.

With the night and the day came time, and time consumes every page of the story thereafter. Time spent becoming a people – Israel. Then a people with a land. Then a people with an empire. Then an empire divided, two kingdoms. Then a people with not a kingdom between them, then a people without a land. Exiles in a foreign place full of foreign gods, lots of gods, of every kind. One for the sea. One for the sky. Another for the earth. A god for every element. So many gods, Israel began to wonder about her own. It took a long time and great suffering to understand, to get the story straight, that God did not belong to them. They belonged to God.

Long before they were a people, God was. Long after they ceased to be a people, God still would be. God is, they learned – a redundant phrase. And no amount of clinging to their empires or their land or their fear, or even clinging to their notions of what it meant to be the people of God, could change that. But knowing that *God is*, that *God ever was*, and that *God ever will be* does change everything about life in this world. And we know it, friends, by praying. We learn it by becoming people who pray. By becoming people who pray, we grow the eyes to see and the ears to hear and the hearts and minds to care about the things God cares about, to become the caretakers, the proper caretakers, the Christ-like caretakers of this creation within this bubble.

Things feel really crazy these days, don't they? Pandemics and protests. So much violence and death. It's tempting to imagine that because our world is upside-down, THE world itself is more upside-down than usual. But it is not. Syria is not suddenly more upside-down than ever. The US-Mexican border is not suddenly more upside-down than ever. The poverty-infested communities all over our country are not more upside-down than ever. The violent households in our city are not more upside-down than ever. That we are shocked by the events of this spring speaks more of our privilege than it does of the state of the world. The fact that disease and racism and violence are aberrant to us does not make them aberrant. They are not. Our shock is what is aberrant.

Normally I read and pray and write my sermons in a cozy room full of light from a picture window looking out onto a forest. My best books are there and all my favorite pens and notebooks. One time, circumstances required me to write my sermon in the waiting area at the county jail. I was writing away when I felt something on my head, but I didn't pay much attention to it. A few minutes later, a very big cockroach walked down the front of my shirt and dropped onto the writing pad of paper in my lap. You could say that I got excited. But I have to tell you that I probably also never wrote a clearer, tighter, better sermon than I wrote in the waiting area of the county jail.

No doubt a bird's-eye view of the creation has its advantages. It's physically safer for sure; it's much cleaner (not nearly as many bugs). But it also lends itself to

misunderstanding, for which the people of God have at times paid dearly in the past. It could be that these days are days in which we might understand ourselves to be paying the cost of that misunderstanding. A misunderstanding in which we are coming to the hard truth that our faith does not belong to us. We belong to it. We do not set the terms of our faith. It sets the terms of our lives. We will take gentle care of the creation or we will suffer the consequences. It doesn't have to be a warning. It can be good news. Jesus showed us how it's done. It's done with a life of prayer.

Modern saint Josemaría Escrivá wrote that an hour at study is an hour of prayer. He's my indoor saint. My favorite outdoor saint is and ever will be St. Francis, who preached to birds and who is said to have worked out a deal between a wolf and a village wherein the wolf promised not to attack the villagers and the villagers promised to feed the wolf. St. Francis called the animals his brothers and sisters. Friends, up close a life of prayer is a life of kindness, justice, and humility, lived inside this bubble of creation with all other living things. Bugs, bushes, bears, human beings. It is a life that is never surprised by and never shies away from the grief and the brokenness around us, because we don't need to and we don't have to; because we have nothing to fear and nothing to lose; because always and forever we belong to the Lord. Now. Always. Forever. And nothing, nothing, nothing will ever, ever change that. So I invite you to be wise; be brave; be full of joy this day, knowing that you and we belong to the Lord. Amen and amen. Let's pray.