

Creation – Genesis 1:1-2:4

So, here we are back at the beginning...beginning of the universe...beginning of the Bible. But to help us talk about this familiar story, I'm going to start more in the middle of the Old Testament. As we do, hang on to that part that says "formless and void." Another translation for that is chaos. The murky, wild, waters of the sea were associated with chaos.

So, travel with me to Judah...600 years before Jesus was born. The world is chaotic. There has been one war after another with successive super-powers conquering the region. Already, the northern kingdom of Israel has been destroyed by Assyria. Jerusalem has survived a siege.

The prophets... God's spokesmen...have been warning of disaster for decades. Why? Because the people have not been living according to the covenant they have with God. They've gone after the gods of other nations, thinking those gods will protect them. They've put faith in human power, making alliances with nations they think have their back...only to find out they don't.

They've set up a society where the poor are neglected, laborers are exploited and the rich get richer. The commandments God gave them to order life is ignored. Their worship is false...they go through the motions, but their lives are not shaped by their relationship with God. In spite of everything, they're sure God will still rescue them.

Then, the chaos worsens. The next rising superpower is Babylon. Babylon defeats Judah, destroys Jerusalem, and carries the best and brightest off to exile in Babylon.

In Babylon, they feel they've been abandoned by their God. If wars on earth reflect wars between gods, the Babylonian gods must have won. They must be more powerful.

The chief Babylonian god was Marduk. The Babylonian creation story involves Marduk and the goddess Tiamat. Tiamat reigns over the seas of chaos. There are wars between the gods but ultimately Marduk defeats chaos...he defeats Tiamat by standing on her hindparts and smashing her skull. He then slices her in half and out of parts of her body creates the universe.

It is here in Judah's history...in Babylon...that this creation story is written. Likely there was an ancient oral tradition handed down. But here in Babylon it became very important to tell the story of their own God's creation.

Contrast Marduk and Tiamat with...In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the 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.

³Then God said, "Let there be light"
and there was light.

God brings creation into being, not with violence, but with a breath...a wind...a word.

And God does not reign over creation by coercion, as Babylon's gods do. This beautiful poem reminds the heartbroken people of Judah, that God still reigns over chaos. And that God made a beautiful world out of love and delight. And what's more, God called that creation good...very good even.

They were immersed in chaos, fear, grief, and uncertainty. This beautiful creation poem was spoken into that chaos. It may have been used as the liturgy for their worship. It reminded them that their God had power over chaos...that God could bring beauty and life out of chaos. It reminded them that God created out of love...for love...not violence, like the Babylonians. It reminded them that their God was the creator of all that is.

In the 300,000 years since humans appeared, chaos has always been knocking at the door. Floods, storms, wars, riots, explosions, and all sorts of mayhem have repeatedly threatened our always precarious tranquility.

Twenty years ago yesterday, chaos erupted again in our lives. People were immersed in fear, grief, and uncertainty. They flooded churches once again, uncertain of what else to do. They came to lament. But they also came to hear again that God reigns over chaos...that God brings beauty out of chaos and life out of death.

Also twenty years ago yesterday, I was ordained into the ministry of word and sacrament after you all decided to entrust me with this call. I was ordained on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

It was an odd, but powerful joining of events. Each year, I am reminded that although 9/11 will always be remembered as a day of destruction, it was also a day of a whole new thing beginning for me and for us. That day in 2011 the 9/11 memorial at the site of the towers was opened. My friend who preached for my ordination used the image of the memorial rising out of the destruction.

In many ways, that chaos has continued. Two wars with less than hoped for endings...a rise in hate, especially against Middle Eastern people, immigrants, and LGBTQ people but gradually infiltrating so much of our discourse.

Then came the pandemic and the economic crash related to the pandemic and continued struggles with both. There's been racial unrest in the midst of ongoing inequality. Fires, floods and hurricanes have been relentless.

It's not hard to put ourselves in the shoes of the people of Judah grieving for a lost past on the soil of Babylon. We too are tempted to long for some golden past...one which really doesn't exist.

What do the next 10 years hold? As a whole, the Christian church is in trouble. Many churches have already closed, and if the trend continues, likely many more will in the next 10 years.

What's in store for our nation? Will we be able to heal the traumas of the last 20 years? Can we find a way through the challenges of Covid and climate change? Will we finally bring an end to racism and sexism and all the other isms? And if we are to tackle those things, how?

I don't know the answers to those questions. I do know it is our call to try. God created us in God's image and gave us dominion over creation. That means we were created to rule over the earth as God would...as people who love creation and tend it with the same love and delight God has for it.

And what do the next 10 years for our congregation hold? Will we struggle? Survive? Thrive? There will no doubt be changes. Maybe uncomfortable ones. New creation comes out of the death of something whose time has come. That can be painful.

But whatever the next 10 years...or 20 or more...holds for us, for the church as a whole, for our nation, for the planet...this creation story will remain our proclamation. That no matter what is going on around us, God is still the God who creates...God is still the God who tamed chaos with a breath and a word. God is still creating beauty and order out of chaos...and God still calls creation good.