

Genesis 1:1-2:4

What Are We Creating?

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Rev. Kelley L. Becker

John and I live at the end of a cul-de-sac in a quiet neighborhood that has mature trees and some enchanting wildlife. You have heard probably more than you want to about my affection for the hummingbirds that dwell in our backyard. The truth is, I consider myself, at heart, someone who would prefer to live downtown in a large city, so I have been surprised by how much I enjoy living in this neighborhood where it isn't uncommon to come home from a walk and see a tick on our dog or run across a deer or armadillo at dusk.

In the last 18 months, like many of you, we've spent more time at home, so I've planted more flowers in our yard than I normally would. I've dotingly tended bird feeders, purchased a salt block and patio heater for our backyard, and moved other creature comforts around outside. These little things are little acts of resistance. They are my way of claiming our little plot of land a haven from the chaos that has engulfed the world. When we create something, whether it is a flower garden, a loaf of bread, a painting, a clay pot, or a place that breathes life into our soul, we are actively resisting the world's chaos.

In this season of life, the chaos we are experiencing is largely due to COVID, but certainly there is no shortage of causes for the state of the world. I remember in the spring of 2020, having been sheltered in place for 8 weeks or so, John and I masked up and went to a local nursery to buy our spring flowers. I debated it for days before we went. Was it safe to go? Maybe we shouldn't go...after all, it wasn't really necessary. But it was. We came home and I spent the afternoon outside raking, planting, and watering. When I finished, I looked around at what I had created and said to myself, "COVID can't take this."

The act of creating not only helps us actively resist the desperation and chaos of the world, it draws us closer to the Holy. I have a hunch this is because when we are creating, we are co-creators with God, our Creator. Today's text is one of two creation stories in the Bible. This story likely dates to the 6th century BCE during the Babylonian Exile. It is assigned to what is called the Priestly tradition, which means it was written for exiles who were desperate for a glimmer of hope.

Within the cauldron of despair and hopelessness in which they found themselves, the exiles created a new national identity and a new way of being faithful to God. You see, the Exile was devastating because the exiles' shared history was built on the promise of God to protect them and use them for God's purposes in human history (You will be my people and I will be your God.). Their defeat, expulsion from Judea, and the loss of the land promised to them by God seemed to imply their faith in God's promise (covenant) was misplaced. This kind of deep crisis can precipitate the most profound despair or the most profound reworking of a world view. For the Jews in Babylon, it did both.

Read more here: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-babylonian-exile>

Into that desperation, the Israelite theologians wrote the story we find in Genesis 1. It was not meant to explain how the world was physically created. It also wasn't meant to be like the Near East creation myths already circulating, even though this story is like them in some ways. It was meant to be a bold theological statement for the people of God: Despite present circumstances, the God of Israel, can still be trusted. And this bold theological statement holds true for us as well. Despite present circumstances, that may include sickness, poverty, war, division, and isolation, our God can still be trusted.

This is Genesis 1:1-2:3

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. ¹²The 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. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

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

²⁰And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” ²¹So 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. ²²God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴And 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. ²⁵God 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. ²⁶Then 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, ^[d] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸God 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.” ²⁹God 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. ³⁰And 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.

This story stresses the ease with which everything came to be. Nothing happened by chance; everything was made according to design. It is a poetic narrative that was likely formed for use in worship. By merely speaking, God created time in the form of day and night. Next, God made three distinctive regions, the sky, the land, and the seas, and in each, God placed the things that belonged there: planets and stars, plants, fish and birds, living creatures, and finally, human beings. God pronounced all of it good.

The large scope of this text moves from God’s confrontation with chaos, “formless void and darkness,” to the serene and joyous rule of God over a universe at rest. It invites the listening community to celebrate God’s relationship with all that was created, a relationship that can never be severed, because God’s created can never be anything other than that. What I mean by that is, for example, human beings will be teachers, nurses, siblings, friends, musicians, scientists...exiles, COVID patients and survivors, Democrats, and Republicans, but we will always only exist because we were created by God. Our existence hinges on our connection with the Holy, whether we recognize it or not. That will never change. Everyday God confronts the chaos of the world. God is still speaking. God is still creating.

And that is why spending time considering our role as creators and co-creators is worthwhile. When we create, we are fulfilling our purpose, to “Be fruitful and multiply.” I don’t think this directive has to be limited to procreation. Procreation was a priority for the exiles because they lived in a time when average life span was not what it is today. They needed to have a lot of children. The more children they had, the safer they were, the more likely their people would survive. There are plenty of people in the world now. Today, there are other ways to be fruitful and other things that would do well to be multiplied. Everything we create has

the potential to multiply goodness: music, art, food, love, and healing. However, in times of crisis, like pandemics, hurricanes, wildfires, days like 9-11, destruction sure seems to outpace creation. The world needs creators.

When my son, Andrew, was little, he enjoyed destruction. He was born 3 years after Hurricane Andrew wreaked havoc in the Bahamas, Florida, and Louisiana, so in some ways, his name was perfect. He was the kid who would look at the Lego tower his brother, Christopher, worked for hours to build, not with amazement at the architectural masterpiece it was, but with a glimmer in his eye, an eye of destruction. When Andrew came into the room, chaos often followed. Most of the time it was delightfully annoying because he had this infectious belly laugh that accompanied his destruction. Generally, even Christopher thought he was adorable. But there were times when he did not. There were times Andrew's hurricane way of being wasn't really appreciated.

So, I devised a plan to teach Andrew that creating could be just as much fun as destroying. One day I asked him if he wanted to play a game with me and I named it builder and destroyer. I told him I would be the builder and he would be the destroyer. I explained the job of the destroyer was to knock down whatever I build as fast as possible, but the destroyer had to wait until the builder said, "My project is complete." We practiced saying "My project is complete," together and I began to build. He sat next to me as I worked, asking me every once in a while, if "my was project was complete." I would tell him it wasn't, but I would always ask him a question, like, "What color should I use now?" or "How high should I make this part?" He was happy to advise. I built a dog park next to my building and asked him which animals I should put in it. Together, we moved the animals into their new home. We named the park, "Mommy and Andrew's More Than Just Dogs Park." Catchy. Huh? Finally, I said to him, "My project is complete." He looked at what I had built, and he said, "I think we should leave it up for brother to see." And so, we did. After Christopher saw it, Andrew joyfully demolished it.

The next day, I asked Andrew if he wanted to play builder and destroyer again. He said he did, but on one condition. He said, "I want to be the builder." I happily agreed. While he built, he asked my advice on various design choices. I talked to him about how in life we have lots of opportunities to choose whether to be a builder or a destroyer, just like he did that day. I told him that I think it's good to build more than we destroy. When he finished his creation, he said, "My project is

complete.” And he looked at me with a hopeful look on his face that gave way to a big grin when I said, “I think we should wait to destroy it until your brother sees it.” To be clear, after that day, Andrew still loved a good demolition, but he learned to take note of what he and other people created, to acknowledge that something was there that hadn’t been before. And that someone made that happen. Like our bulleting cover today, created by Rose Dorris. Rose is a very good example of someone who chooses to be a creator.

I know it is easy to feel discouraged right now. COVID is destroying our sense of safety and well-being. The division in our county is destroying our sense of community and neighborliness. The war in Afghanistan has destroyed the people of Afghanistan and families of soldiers who have been killed. And the suffering continues. Our way of life is destroying the environment, especially affected are the people who are experiencing major weather pattern shifts, the rise in sea levels, and loss of income due to things like overfishing. The lives of women are destroyed when their rights to make their own healthcare choices are taken away. And this weekend as we remember 9-11 twenty years ago, we are acutely aware of the ways in which terrorism destroyed and continues to destroy. I could go on and on. And the truth is, we can’t fix any of it. But I believe we can *create* our way to a different world, a world in which destruction no longer rules the day.

You may be thinking...I’m weary. I am re-traumatized every single day. I can barely get up in the morning. I get it. Let’s remember, though, that our text today reminds us that the completion of every cycle of work is rest. We tend to treat rest like it’s a thing to do when there is nothing else to do. You (We) need to rest. Take a rest from the news, a rest from our jobs and our work at home, a rest from worrying, even a rest from brainstorming solutions. Give yourself permission to set it all down and just rest. And then when you have rested, pick some of it back up. The words of the Talmud encourage me when I feel overwhelmed, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

We don’t have to fix it all, but we are called to keep working, keep creating. There is an image in our text today that has been helpful to me when I have been “daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief.” It is a powerful image that helps

me imagine God's presence in a world that, at times, seems like it has been forsaken.

In Genesis 1:2, the New Revised Standard version says "a wind from God swept over the waters." The King James Version says, "the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." The Hebrew word translated in the NRSV "wind" and in the KJV "spirit," is ruach. Ruach, like a good number of Hebrew words doesn't have one perfect English translation. There are times ruach is translated "breath" as well. In this context, ruach is the part of God that animates, moves, brings life, and creates. I believe that part of God is available to all of us, perhaps especially when we are in need of some creative energy or inspiration.

I imagine God in the friend who breathes life into hard days by saying just the right words. I imagine God in the belly laugh of a child who deeply experiences joy everywhere. I imagine God in the work of artists like Rose, musicians like Alex, servants like you. Each one of us has access to the spirit of God because it lives inside us and around us. It cheers us on and in the words of my favorite hymn, *For Everyone Born*, I believe that God delights, "when we are creators of justice and joy, compassion and peace."

I want to end with the question I asked in the title of this sermon, "What are we creating together?" Here's what I see. In a world that doesn't feel very safe to a lot of people, we are creating a safe space for people to be who they were created to be. We do that by paying attention to the pictures on our walls, the images we use on the screen, by using words that affirm the value and worth of all people, by taking care of our facility and grounds so everyone feels welcome, by listening to each other's stories, not to judge, but to understand, and by cheering each other on as each one of us becomes who we were created to be and as we, together, become the community we were created to be.

We were created to care for what God created, to bring wholeness to a fragmented world, to continue to create the world God dreams about. And I can't imagine doing this work with anyone else. Amen.