

GENESIS

TEXTS: Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 16, 2020

Let me read that very first verse of Genesis again. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 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.” That was me on Tuesday—a formless void in the dark. Once I tripped the circuit breaker in my parsonage office by trying to run an air conditioning unit in two rooms simultaneously, the past weeks of long, intense hours of selling a house, packing, moving, unpacking, winding down at the Bible Society and beginning here overloaded my circuit, too. And as Frank tried to find an electrician, I just lay down on my bed in the dark and let the wind of God coming from the ceiling fan blow over me. “Formless void” pretty much summed it up.

That’s where Jacob was, too, when we found him in the ford of the Jabbok over the past two weeks. That’s also where everyone associated with any kind of school is right now—teachers, administrators, students, and parents—as well as anyone working in healthcare, anyone living in a congregate facility of any kind as months of isolation wear on, anyone who has lost a job or whose unemployment benefits have run out. But even without all that, there are still those of us, like me, who have lives that others can only dream of, yet still find ourselves hitting a wall when the circuit breaker trips and it’s just one thing too many. We become that formless void and darkness covers the face of the deep.

But as I lay there under the ceiling fan, I remembered my favorite Bible word. It’s in Hebrew, and it occurs here in Genesis 1:1. The word is *ruach* and the New Revised Standard Version of the text that I just read translates the word *ruach* as “wind.” “a wind of God swept over the face of the waters.” Other translations say the “spirit” of God; and it would be just as correct to translate it as the “breath” of God because the Hebrew word “*ruach*” means all three: wind, breath, spirit. In English we’ve taken a rich and deep word, sterilized it, and broken it into pieces. For us, wind is about meteorology, breath is about biology, and spirit is about theology or maybe psychology or philosophy. But when you run into the word *ruach* in the Bible, there are no distinctions between those things, which I think is pretty awesome.

An ancient Israelite would see the wind rustling through the olive trees and recognize not just a weather event, but also God’s Spirit and the source of their own breathing because the language made no distinction between those things. To take a deep breath in was to breathe in God’s own Spirit—the very act of breathing was a recognition of God as the life-giver. And because it was also the wind, which blows whether people are around or not, God’s Spirit was available to everything on earth. We tend to look back on ancient societies and consider ourselves more educated, more developed, and, therefore, somehow better equipped to deal with life’s stresses and strains.

But as I lay on my bed, it was not any of those distinct disciplines that pulled me back together again. It was the memory of an ancient Hebrew word—the *ruach*—that stirred within me as I felt the breeze from the ceiling fan. It wasn’t technology rotating above my body and stirring the air. It was the wind of God—the *ruach*—sweeping over my formless void. And it was not just sweeping **over** me, it was available for me to catch with my breath and take into myself.

There are lots of passages of the Bible people turn to for comfort and hope. Many find those in the words of Jesus, in the promise of resurrection, or perhaps in the promises of the Hebrew prophets. And those are wonderful. But, personally, I am hard-pressed to find a verse that renews me as quickly as Genesis 1:1, especially when I’m in the ford of the Jabbok river—when my wrestling and struggles have thrown me against a wall and put my hip out of joint as we saw happen to Jacob over the past two

weeks. It's Genesis 1:1 that reminds me that such a place is, literally, where everything began. In the Bible, all of Creation comes out of **that** moment.

I should take a brief detour here to remind you that I don't look to the Bible for science and facts. I look to the Bible for Truth with a capital T—the big-picture concepts that show us glimpses of who we are and what the faith that gave birth to Jesus thought about the nature of God, the world, and all the communities formed on the face of the earth. To insist that the seven days of Creation portrayed here in Genesis 1 means that the earth is only 6,000 years old or that evolution can't be a thing, is not only a misunderstanding of the passage and the nature of the Bible itself but it also does harm to the faith of individuals and drives people out of the church. I have met them.

I dive deep into these ancient stories not for facts about how the world actually began but to find the Truth they are trying to teach about the nature of God, the world, and the role of every living thing within it. God is not trying to be our geology professor. The first chapter of Genesis is an epic poem. Poems by their very nature aren't meant to be taken literally. Don't get caught in that trap. Poems give us Truth, not facts. So, with that understanding, let's go back to the void and the hope that lies there, swirling in the dark.

One of the Truths of this chapter is that when God passes over the formless void of our lives, things start to happen. Light breaks open the darkness so that we can see clear sky. Something solid begins to form beneath our feet, and from that ground, fruit trees, and vegetables, and flowers and mighty oaks begin to grow—all with their seeds, their ability to reproduce, already created within them.

Soon we recognize seasons, and can see lights even in the nighttime sky. The waters begin to teem with life, birds fill the air, a cow's hooves break open the soil to hold the rainwater, the wolves howl, the sheep lie down in green pastures, the ants go marching one by one and ten by ten and a thousand by a thousand hurrah! Hurrah! And then at last, the hardest thing to pull out of that formless void—we humans—arise to take our place in the garden home God has made.

On my bed on Tuesday, my formation in this first chapter of Genesis came to my aid as the ceiling fan twirled in the dark. "Ah, a breeze in the sweltering heat. But wait, it's never just a breeze. It's the Spirit, the *ruach*. And that knowledge made me remember to breathe it in—because I didn't need God's Spirit out there on Tuesday. I needed it in here. And as I took several deep breaths, I knew that however hard I was thrown against that wall, that this was not an ending place. The formless void is the beginning place. It is unlimited potential. And when swept by the Spirit of God, literally all things can be born.

And that's just one part of what this poem in Genesis 1 brings to us. A second, related piece is that every single bit of Creation springs from the same source. God speaks things into being in Genesis 1, but once Creation is gaining steam, God uses what's already there to create or sometimes to reveal other things. You would never know there was any land until God commands the waters to bunch up and reveal it. Then God commands that land to start putting up farm stands and tells the waters to start the fisheries, even including great sea monsters to help to novelists down the road. And with things to eat all over the place, the earth is told to bring out the white-tailed deer and the hairy-nosed wombats and the Burmese pythons and the crickets to sing on summer nights.

The point being that in the stories that formed Judaism and therefore Jesus and Christian faith, earth is a collaborative effort right from the get-go. While we humans like to focus on ourselves at the end of the chapter, the rest of Creation has already been hard at work, joining God in making the world, before we ever arrive on the scene. Earth and the heavens and everything described in Genesis 1 are all expressions of the same substance and each unique piece produced from that common core joins the *ruach* of God in blowing and breathing life into the formless void. Further, the text tells us that God called it all "good." There is nothing called "not good" in this story. There is nothing called a "pest."

There is not a single thing in all of Creation that was not called out of the same primordial soup by the voice of God. And as each thing comes into being and receives its stamp of goodness, it then participates in making the rest of it.

For us as human beings to jump to the end of the chapter and think that God giving us “dominion” over it all means we can stomp on anything that gets in our way, is a sin of epic proportion. The problem with our interpretation of Genesis 1:28 about humans getting dominion over all things and being told to subdue it is so enormous that I’ll be doing a whole sermon just on that. Next week. But the understanding of what it’s **supposed** to mean is back here in the parts we don’t pay attention to because, you know, we weren’t created yet and it’s all about us, right? No.

We are of a piece with everything else that exists, and in Genesis 1, everything else was necessary before human life could be sustained. Each thing that is created in this chapter is needed by what comes after it. So, while we may like to think of ourselves as the crowning achievement of Creation, we’re also the most dependent. All that came before is necessary for humanity to thrive. So, to misunderstand what is meant by “dominion” and “subdue” at the end of this chapter is to put the entire human species at risk. Kind of like it is right now. But more on that next week.

The good news is that if we can quit arguing about the age of the earth and evolution and really hear what this ancient and wise poem has to tell us, it holds the key to healing everything that is broken in our world today. If you remember from Part I of the Jabbok River story, Jabbok in Hebrew—Yah-BOK—means “emptying,” because the Jabbok River was a tributary that emptied into the Jordan. To be able to cross the river and receive the offer of grace, Jacob had to enter the ford of the Emptying River and empty himself of everything he thought he knew about who he was, why he was here, and where he was going and wrestle it all down until he came out limping and blessed.

Right out of the gate, in the very first verse of the Bible, we’re told that such emptying is not the end, but the beginning. That’s literally what Genesis means, “beginning.” The formless void isn’t something to be feared; it’s where everything starts. It holds all that ever has been or can be within it. It’s where the Spirit of God—the *ruach*—sweeps through to fill our lungs and cool our hot skin. And once we recognize that we’re not alone—even in that formless void, even in the ford of the emptying river—new things, good things, can come into being.

At all levels of society, we’re against the wall. It takes ten times the effort to do even the simplest things right now and we strain against the headwinds. Then one day we trip the circuit and there we are. The formless void. The ford of the Jabbok. And we’re there as a church. As I talk with people and share ideas, people ask, “But how will that work? What if we can’t go back into the building by Christmas or even by Easter? What about this event and that program and these issues? And did you know we’re now looking at a \$70k shortfall in the budget for the year? What are we going to do?” The answer is, I have no clue. But I do know where to look.

The church right now—here and everywhere—is in many ways a formless void and darkness covers the face of the deep. This may seem too far out for you, but think about the fact that what has brought us to our knees here in 2020 is a disease of the lungs, joining the communities of color that for years have been crying out, “I can’t breathe!”

We think of those things as separate—racism, healthcare—but the witness of Genesis 1 is that we all spring from the same source and substance. Every symptom; every injustice; every looming disaster is a product of the same disease, manifesting differently in different parts of the body. We’re suffering because we’ve not yet recognized that we were all created out of the same stuff. And we have failed to notice the *ruach* that’s sweeping over the face of the deep darkness in which we find ourselves. It’s not just wind. It’s our breath. It’s our healing. It is our life.

That reality of our common core and our dependence on one another, points us to the good news: To heal any piece of our world, however small, is the beginning of healing for all of it. We don't have to choose between causes or try to do everything. The formless void around us and the roaring wind storms sweeping the plains tell us that the Spirit of God is beginning Creation anew. And Genesis 1 reminds us that we are part of that project. As we wrestle with what to do here at Crawford, we're helping to create what church will be in a renewed world. None of us knows exactly what that will be, but once there's evening and morning the first day, God will call forth the work for the second, and then for the third, until all the world is whole and good and we can rest from our labors.

We've been in ministry together now for two weeks. Do I know what church will look like in October? No, I don't. Maybe God doesn't even know. Maybe when God told the earth to produce vegetation, lima beans came as a surprise—an idea of the earth itself as God called for her to produce vegetation. Maybe the re-creation of this church and every church is up to us, empowered by the Spirit of God who fills our lungs with breath and rustles the leaves on the trees. But I do know that every time we participate in renewing one little bit of the world, it helps to renew all of it.

Are you in the formless void? Let it be. Take a deep breath and then another. Feel the wind. The Spirit is sweeping over the dark face of the deep. The first light is coming. Amen.