

## Older Than Dirt

TEXT: Genesis 1

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on August 6, 2023*

As you know by now, I love the Old Testament; and much of my ministry has been given over to trying to rescue this part of the Bible from Christians who, I believe, have misunderstood and therefore misused it, leading legions of Christians to hate it and ignore it. The problem with hating and ignoring it, is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ grew from the acorn of the mighty oak of the Hebrew Scriptures. The sapling we see growing in the New Testament can't be rightly understood apart from the nature of the mature, thousands-years-old tree that birthed it.

If we want to claim the mantle of a disciple of Jesus; or even if we just want to understand how Christianity came to be the way it is, with its parables and conflicts; and with a paradoxical center that says a bloody execution is somehow central to healing—we need to settle back into the more ancient stories of the faith that gave us birth, and the DNA of Judaism, that still flows through our theology and practice. Did you know that this stole I wear is the remnant of the Jewish prayer shawl?

Before there was a garden tomb that gave birth to Christian faith, there was a story of a primordial garden with a Tree of Life, that gave birth to Jewish faith. Before Jesus told a fictional parable about a man who had two sons, one obedient and one prodigal, fighting over who would inherit their father's wealth; Jesus read from his own Hebrew Bible about Abraham's grandsons, Jacob and Esau, two brothers, one obedient and one prodigal, fighting over their father's inheritance.

These stories from the Hebrew Bible, repeated over millennia, taught Israel what made their God unique and about the practices that could, if done rightly, spread God's blessings to all the nations of the earth. Their struggles to understand and live that out—and the disasters that followed when they didn't—fill the 39 books of our Christian Old Testament because they also comprised the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible, which was the Bible of Jesus, Paul, and all the main characters of the New Testament. Until we understand Jesus as a Jewish man, we will misunderstand him as a Christian Savior. Welcome to August and September.

We're beginning a larger look at those stories with the grand poem that comprises the entire first chapter of the first book of the Bible. I've just read Genesis 1 for you, and, I'll say it again, it's poetry. It isn't science or geology or rules for social construction. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the age of the earth. Nada. Zero. It's a poem. It conveys truth, but it's the truth of a poet, not the facts of a textbook.

Key for this morning is that the way the poem is structured tells us both the truth about how things come into being and, with a little reverse engineering, a warning on how they can be destroyed. And that can shed light on what is happening around us as we speak.

What do you mean the way the poem is structured? I'm glad you asked. If you've ever taken a philosophy 101 class and had a professor make you hold out your hand and try to prove that your hand actually exists, you'll know that the question of what it means to say something "exists" is an age-old question with a variety of answers.

These are all rather grossly simplified, but Aristotle believed that if you could describe the essence of a thing, then it existed. St. Thomas Aquinas said, "Not so fast! People describe things all the time that don't actually exist." We call it fiction. And that sent people scrambling right back to the first question—well, what is existence anyway? As one scholar asked more recently, "Does Ronald McDonald exist?" Descartes famously rooted the answer in consciousness. "I think, therefore I am." Well, that's fine for humans, although Ronald McDonald is still iffy; but don't rocks exist? Does a city have consciousness?

For me, and many of my generation, we tend to think of something existing when it has mass—when it "matters" in the sense that it has physical properties, matter, that we can hold and touch and stub our toe on. I think it's no accident that Madonna, who is just eight months older than I am, put the lines "we are living in a material world and I am a material girl" into our heads.

So when I first came to Genesis 1 as a child, not only did I come with a “material” view of existence; I came to it with my fundamentalist, literalist view of the Bible, which held me back and assaulted my friends from my mid-teens to mid-twenties. And that view caused me problems with the biblical text right off the bat.

My spiritual teachers told me that God created the world *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. Okay, no argument from me. That fits in the job description I associated with being God. But then I read the opening of Genesis 1. I first read it in the Revised Standard Version, so I’ll use that here:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.”

“Wait a minute,” I thought. That’s not *ex nihilo*. God didn’t start from scratch. God’s spirit is “moving over the face of the **waters**.” Well, how did those waters get there? There’s already this primordial soupy, stuff that God uses to make everything else. There is—in short—matter, before God utters the first word. *Liquid* matter, but still something that takes up space, something that you could presumably drown in and that most living things did drown in if you believe the story of the Great Flood coming up in a few chapters.

Instant biblical crisis for me. I prioritized Bible over church doctrine at that point, so creation *ex nihilo* excused itself from my still-nascent theology. And it stayed out, long after I had abandoned a literal view of Scripture.

In fact, it wasn’t until I was writing the Old Testament volume of my Bible studies for the Massachusetts Bible Society in 2012 that I learned that there was another option for what it meant for something to exist that I had never been taught before. And this other option came from—wait for it—the ancient Near East. Exactly the culture that produced Genesis 1 and my problematic primordial soup.

For our Genesis 1 poet and his or her contemporaries, nothing truly existed unless three criteria were met. First, the thing had to be distinguishable from other things. It needed a distinct form. That’s actually something like Aristotle, but it was not sufficient. In addition to a distinct form, the thing needed a function, however rudimentary. But even that wasn’t enough. To actually exist, the thing needed a name. So those three things: A distinct form, a purpose, and a name. You needed all three to win the existence badge in the ancient Near East.

That shook my world as Genesis 1 suddenly came sharply into focus.

“The earth was without form and void.” That’s an ancient Near Eastern poet’s way of saying, nothing yet existed. Nothing had a distinguishable form. “Darkness was on the face of the deep.” You couldn’t distinguish anything from anything else. Bingo! *Ex nihilo* wanted a word with me.

Next, God moves from just kind of parasailing over the waters to action. “And God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God **separated the light from the darkness**.” There it is. Light is on its way to existence as God makes it distinct from darkness.

Next verse, “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.” Woo hoo! They both have names now—and they can be distinguished from each other. Both darkness and light have almost crossed the threshold.

“And there was evening and there was morning, one day.” One what? One “day.” So what is that? Oh my goodness, it’s the function! The function of light and dark, day and night is to mark the passing of time and each set of dark and light comprise one day. They exist now—dark and light; or, as we know them, “Day” and “Night” have passed all the tests.

By then I was speed reading. Day two, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters...and God called the firmament Heaven.” The RSV calls it heaven, but the Hebrew is the word for sky. Sky—the sky now exists! God separates the waters to distinguish the space in-between, which now serves the function of holding back the waters. So yeah, rain might fall from the waters above, but the sky steps in and does its job and dries it up because God is about to make some more adjustments to the waters below.

“And God said, ‘let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear. And it was so.’” Bam! Separation. “God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he

called Seas!” Names! Earth! Sea! Brother poet of the ancient world, I see you! I get you now! And then follows the purpose—the land holds the plants and trees. So earth fully exists on day three. The waters don’t get their purpose until the fish (and also, notably, sea monsters), show up on day five, but you get the picture.

You can map those three things across the entire poem, and if you should do my Old Testament study, that’s an exercise you’d do in the class period. And while I always love learning new context for passages of Scripture, my very favorite thing is when that new context shines a bright light on things happening in the world around me. So let’s take our three-part existence formula—name, form, and function—and see how it holds up today.

I want to start with a Winston Churchill radio address from 1941. In talking about the massacres taking place in Germany and beyond as World War II was raging, he said: “Whole districts are being exterminated. Scores of thousands—literally scores of thousands—of executions in cold blood are being perpetrated by the German police troops. **We are in the presence of a crime without a name.**”

Listening to that address was a Polish-born lawyer named Raphael Lemkin, who already had lost much of his family in the Holocaust. So, Mr. Lemkin created the name for that crime. He called it “genocide” from the Greek word *genos*, meaning race or tribe and the Latin *cide*, meaning killing. And, just like in Genesis 1, now that the act had a name, now that it could be distinguished from other things (it was targeted killing in cold blood), and now that it had a function (to exterminate an entire people) “genocide” was launched into the world as a thing that existed.

Once something exists, you can deal with it. Just seven years later Lemkin’s new word was picked up by a new international body, the United Nations, who quickly created the “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.” With that simple act of naming and defining a crime, actions could be taken on all kinds of fronts. It could be—and would be—identified and prosecuted. The concept could be studied and taught and, in doing so, hopefully prevented.

The cold-blooded targeting of entire races and tribes of peoples had been going on for millennia, we Europeans had been doing it here to Native tribes for centuries. But until it was distinguished from other kinds of killing, with its function identified and named by Churchill and Mr. Lemkin, there was no systematic way for nations and societies to address it. Likewise, it was in the wake of the Vietnam War and Agent Orange that we got the word “ecocide,” the human-caused, large-scale destruction of the earth, in 1972.

Genesis 1 has absolutely nothing to do with the age of the earth; but it has everything to do with the state of the earth and its inhabitants today. The truth it tells us is that language creates *ex nihilo*, which is how we find ourselves always in battles about language—especially when it comes to law and education.

Most crimes against women and children were defined and adjudicated as property crimes until well into the twentieth century. Ditto for those who were enslaved. You might say there’s no such thing as witches, but from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 women were executed for being witches, mostly across Europe but also right here in good, old Salem, Massachusetts.

But it’s not just names that bring something into existence, it’s a name combined with a distinguishable form and function. Lemkin’s new word, “genocide,” had to be paired with Churchill’s description of the act as carried out in the Holocaust to create something that was actionable in the world.

The history of civil rights here and elsewhere is filled with the battles over the full set of those things. Do women and children function as property or as people? Does a difference in sexual preference or gender identity function as deviance or just difference? Is an addiction a moral failing or a disease? Those questions, when decided in law or taught in classrooms, become life and death matters; questions of existence.

In Genesis 1, each time something is distinguished from something else, the created order expands and God calls it good. A healthy ecosystem is only possible if it contains both a wide diversity of species and a significant diversity of the gene pool within a species. A truth in Genesis 1 right beneath our noses is that diversity is a strength, not a weakness. That’s not just how creation progresses in the poem; it’s how life and civilization on planet earth has progressed ever since.

We invented microscopes that made chemistry and medicine possible, as we could see, name, and define the functions of atoms and electrons and photons that previously were just swimming in the primordial soup, unable to be of use. We invented telescopes to do the same with planets and stars and galaxies that had previously been beyond our sight.

Consider the case of poor Pluto. First it was a planet. Then it wasn't. But, if you go to the NASA page about Pluto today, it tells you, "Pluto is a complex world of ice mountains and frozen plains. Once considered the ninth planet, Pluto is the best known of a new class of worlds called dwarf planets." Pluto and those at NASA who found it worthy of 15 years of time to plan and execute a flyby, have brought a new thing into existence—dwarf planets!

But there have also been times when humans have sought to eliminate the diversity that God calls "good." The fascism that arose in the World War II era was one. We are now in another, as every kind of diversity is under threat. Any initiatives that remind us that diversity is good for the environment, good for business, good for education, good for a healthy society are being shut down.

The Endangered Species Act is itself now endangered. Curriculum for public education in Florida will now explain the benefits rather than the brutal oppression experienced by enslaved Africans; the Diary of Anne Frank is being pulled from library shelves across the country, sexual orientation and gender identity are being re-named—and therefore re-made—from sources of pride and helpful diversity into deviance and criminality. By this past June, Arkansas, Iowa, New Jersey, and New Hampshire had weakened child labor laws; and, of course, women still aren't protected as equal in the language of the US Constitution and we're losing ground quickly.

Trying to remove the language of "Black Lives Matter" and replace it with "All Lives Matter" is an attempt to throw Black lives back into the primordial soup—to deny the gifts of Black perspectives, the wisdom of Black experience, and, ultimately, to strip away the humanity of Black people. Black histories and stories are already out of textbooks and even library storybooks in some states. A children's book about Rosa Parks was re-written to eliminate any mention of why she wasn't allowed to sit at the front of the bus.

The poet in Genesis 1 has told us how to join with God in continuing to create the world: To discover and name new things; to identify their form and function. But it also serves as a key to recognize when individuals, businesses, or governments try to take us backwards; to unmake the world; to undo the existence of things God called good so that darkness will again be upon the face of the deep.

Why would people do that? And, more importantly for us, why would so many Christians now be at the front of the line to unmake the world? That, too, comes from Genesis 1. We'll start there next week. Amen.