

“Creative Creatures”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Rally Sunday

Edina Morningside Community Church; September 12, 2021

**Genesis 1:1-2:4a**

*In the Beginning God created the heavens and the earth. But the earth became chaos and emptiness, and darkness came over the face of the deep—yet the spirit of God was brooding over the surface of the waters.*

*Then God said, “Light: be!” and light was. God saw that light was good, and God separated light from darkness. God called the light “day” and the darkness “night.” Evening came, and morning followed—the first day.*

*Then God said, “Now, make an expanse between the waters! Separate water from water!” So it was: God made the expanse and separated the water above the expanse from the water below it. God called the expanse “Sky.” Evening came, and morning followed—the second day.*

*Then God said, “Waters under the sky: be gathered into one place! Dry ground: appear!” So it was. God called the dry ground “Earth” and the gathering of the waters “Sea.” And God saw that this was good. Then God said, “Earth: produce vegetation—plants that scatter their own seeds, and every kind of fruit tree that bears fruit with its own seed in it!” So it was: the earth brought forth every kind of plant that bears seed, and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it. And God saw that this was good. Evening came, and morning followed—the third day.*

*Then God said, “Now, let there be lights in the expanse of the sky! Separate day from night! Let them mark the signs and seasons, days and years, and serve as luminaries in the sky, shedding light on the earth.” So it was: God made the two great lights, the greater one to illumine the day, and a lesser to illumine the night. Then God made the stars as well, placing them in the expanse of the sky, to shed light on the earth, to govern both day and night, and separate light from darkness. And God saw that this was good. Evening came, and morning followed—the fourth day.*

*God then said, “Waters: swarm with an abundance of living beings! Birds: fly above the earth in the open expanse of the sky!” And so it was: God created great sea monsters and all sorts of swimming creatures with which the waters are filled, and all kinds of birds. God saw that this was good and blessed them, saying, “Bear fruit, increase your numbers, and fill the waters of the seas! Birds, abound on the earth!” Evening came, and morning followed—the fifth day.*

*Then God said, “Earth: bring forth all kinds of living soul—cattle, things that crawl, and wild animals of all kinds!” So it was: God made all kinds of wild animals, and cattle, and everything that crawls on the ground, and God saw that this was good.*

*Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, to be like us. Let them be stewards of the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals, and everything that crawls on the ground.” Humankind was created as God’s reflection: in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them.*

*God blessed them and said, “Bear fruit, increase your numbers, and fill the earth—and be responsible for it! Watch over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things on the earth!” God then told them, “Look! I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the earth, and every tree whose fruit carries its seed inside itself: they will be your food; and to all the animals of the earth and the birds of the air and things that crawl on the ground—everything that has a living soul in it—I give all the green plants for food.” So it was. God looked at all of this creation, and proclaimed that this was good—very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.*

*Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed. On the seventh day God had finished all the work of creation, and so, on that seventh day, God rested. God blessed the seventh day and called it sacred, because on it God rested from all the work of creation.*

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

After an oxygen tank exploded aboard the Apollo 13 spaceship in 1970, three astronauts were stranded in a small lunar module only meant for one. All of those astronauts breathing the same air for days would lead to a deadly buildup of carbon dioxide that would kill them. The air filters they had available from the spaceship were the wrong shape, so they had to figure out how to put a square filter into a round hole. The movie version of these events suggests that, down on Earth at Mission Control, a team of engineers dumped out on a conference table a jumble of cardboard boxes overflowing with everything that the astronauts had available to them in space. From the chaotic pile of hoses, wires, curtains, cables, screws, spacesuits, plastic bags, and duct tape, they would need to pull together *something* to filter the air and save the lives of the crew.

That conference table, with all the piles of disorganized stuff on it, is what comes to mind when I read in Genesis 1 of when God began to create. Although Christian theology has proposed a doctrine of God creating from nothing at all, the Hebrew phrase here is “*tohu vavohu*”, which suggests that there’s stuff in existence but it’s in a state of disordered-ness, and so the translation we’ve just heard is “chaos and emptiness”—*tohu vavohu*. One commentary notes that “the closest English rendering of the Hebrew might be ‘topsy-turvy’... every other time the phrase is used in the Bible, it describes a scene of ruination and desolation.”<sup>1</sup>

*Tohu vavohu*, the upside-downness, the topsy-turvy nature of the world. I can’t think of a better description of where we find ourselves now, in middle America on September 12th of the year 2021. We just marked yesterday the twentieth anniversary of terror striking from the sky, a day “when the world stopped turning”, in the verses of Alan Jackson. We’re living in a worsening pandemic despite widespread and effective vaccines, further community and family splintering due to tribalism and disinformation. We’ve seen a chaotic end to war in Afghanistan, millions of Americans are now liable to be evicted from their homes, and amid hurricanes, droughts, floods and wildfires, “nearly 1 in 3 Americans live in a county hit by a weather disaster in the past three months”, [according to the Washington Post](#). As if to underscore the bizarre world we’re living in, for days there have been confirmed [reports](#) of zebras on the loose in Prince Georges County, Maryland, just outside of Washington DC. We even got [news](#) this week that the Rochester CineMagic movie theater is running out of candy and popcorn. Nothing makes sense anymore; the world is topsy-turvy, *tohu vavohu*.

But God has experience shaping order out of chaos, Genesis tells us. In the poetic arrangement of creation described as the Bible begins, God takes the discordant jumble of existence and steadily—one day at a time—puts the pieces together like those engineers would later do at Mission Control, arranging things in creative ways to be hospitable to life. Here light, and there dark. Some water, some land, and creatures to fill each place with abundance. Sun, moon, and stars find their order and mark the days from nights. What starts out like the discordant sounds of a dropped piano becomes a lush, complex and elegant symphony through God’s creation. God pauses to evaluate, and we hear repeatedly that all of this is “good, very good”.

Then into the midst of it all, God creates humanity in God’s own image. The Creator created other creators, all of us together in our genders, personalities, appearances, skills, and ideas bearing the image of the God who is never done creating something new. Immediately as humanity is called into existence, we are commissioned as stewards and caretakers of creation. We are responsible for it, Genesis says, watching over “the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things on the earth”. A core part of the human vocation—all of us made in the image of God—is taking care of life, and to continue creating alongside the original Creator. The Benedictine nun Joan Chidester [describes](#) our role this way: “work is what we do to continue what God wanted done. ...We work because the world is unfinished and it is ours to develop. We work with a vision in mind ...Work is a commitment to God’s service.” Despite all the ways

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<sup>1</sup> Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive Bible* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: Lanham, Maryland), 2007, pg. 5.

that humanity breaks this calling and contributes to further chaos through climate change, pollution, and other sinful behavior, our original blessing is to live in harmony and stewardship with all of creation.

How then do we fulfill this calling, to be creatives alongside God, working to order chaos? Debra Dean Murphy names that our role is to rediscover the beauty in creation present when God called all things “good, very good”. She [points to](#) at least three gifts of human stewardship in creation:

*There is, no doubt, the gift of activism and advocacy for vulnerable humans and nonhuman creatures, for rivers, mountains, seas, cities, and whole ecosystems. There is the gift of “announcing our place in the family of things,” as Mary Oliver writes: refusing to think and act as if “the environment” is something that somehow excludes us. And there is the gift of cultivating the virtues necessary...for living life well: courage, humility, justice, and compassion.*

In the end, such a biblical interpretation recognizes our kinship, our relatedness, with creation as well as the Creator. Here we might hold alongside *tohu vavohu*, another phrase, “Mitakuye Oyasin”, which comes to us from the Lakota people and means “All Our Relations”. Describing the meaning of this vast relatedness, Chief Arvol Looking Horse writes that

*the word Mitakuye means relations and Oyasin means more than family, more than a Nation, more than all of humankind, everything that has a spirit. The Earth herself...is our relation, and so is the sky, Grandfather Sky, and so is the Buffalo and so are each of the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, those that swim, those that fly, the root nation and the crawling beings who share the world with us. Mitakuye Oyasin refers to the interconnectedness of all beings and all things. We are all interconnected. We are all One.<sup>2</sup>*

This is what Genesis means, with humanity as creatures like the rest of creation, and as creatives like our original Creator. We have the opportunity, like those NASA engineers of long ago, to take a look at the chaos within which we find ourselves, and set to work with one another and with Mitakuye Oyasin, with all our relations. We are called to create and to re-create a world hospitable to all life, a world renewed in the image of God. Indeed, our own spaceship, keeping life alive. May God lead us to the original and existing blessings of creation now, so that we may continue expanding those blessings—and not curses—for all who live alongside us or who come after. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Chief Arvol Looking Horse, from his book *White Buffalo Teachings* (Dreamkeepers Press, 2001). [Related by Sara Thomsen.](#)