

Preached by Jennifer L. James
Director of Family & Adult Ministries
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
June 26, 2011

Genesis 1:1—2:4a

THE STORY OF CREATION

This morning we are focusing on the story of creation. You just heard the first account of creation found in the opening verses of Genesis. These verses are some of my favorite in the Bible. In fact, the stories of creation form and inform the foundation of my faith. They do not hold scientific significance for me, but instead a breadth of theological significance. The Genesis accounts of creation were not written at the beginning of time, so we must consider their historical context in order to really appreciate their depth of meaning.

The first books of the Hebrew Bible were believed to have been written down during the time the Jews were exiled in Babylon. The Jewish creation story was not the only story explaining how the world came to be. There were, in fact, many different creation stories floating around. In particular, the Babylonian creation story, known as “Enuma Elish” would have been alive in their context and a strong influence. So, to better understand our own story, to better understand what our story says about God, ourselves, and our world ... we must first know the story of the Babylonians.

Once upon a time, there were two gods – Apsu and Tiamat. Apsu was the god of fresh water and his wife, Tiamat, was the god of the sea and chaos. Apsu and Tiamat had many children and grandchildren who were very poorly behaved. Apsu was upset by these ill-behaved sons of gods and decided to destroy them. But one of the sons, Ea, learned of Apsu’s plot and instead killed Apsu. Ea and his wife established a home above Apsu’s dead body and they bore a son – Marduk, the god of spring and the patron god of Babylon. He is the hero of this story. Meanwhile, Tiamat is outraged and vows revenge for the death of her husband. She puts together an army of 11 monsters, takes a new husband, Kingu, and puts him in charge of the army. Ea and his father, Anu, try to stop Tiamat’s revenge, but cannot. They worry that no one will be able to stop her. But, Marduk steps up to the plate and says he is willing to fight Tiamat and if he wins, he wants to be “King of all the gods.” He is trained and commissioned by a council and takes off with a chariot in a storm. He captures Tiamat in a net and unleashes an evil wind to inflate Tiamat, the god of the sea. When she is incapacitated, he kills her with an arrow through her heart and captures her husband, Kingu. Marduk divides her corpse, using half to create earth and half to create the sky, complete with bars to prevent the chaotic sea waters from escaping. He takes Tiamat’s saliva to create the rain for the earth. Marduk then creates human beings, but he needs blood and bones to do so. Instead of killing an innocent god, he sacrifices Kingu, the evil god plotting against them. Ea kills Kingu and uses

his blood to fashion mankind so they can perform menial tasks for the gods – they will serve a sentence as divine punishment as slaves. To honor Marduk, the gods construct a house for him in Babylon, where they live happily ever after.

Just as this story doesn't sit right with your theology about God, it didn't sit right with the Jews living in Babylon either. What the Hebrews believed about YHWH and creation was at risk. Today, we will look at the creation story through this lens and learn what Genesis 1 has to say to us ... not about a scientific or historical account about how the world was formed, but instead about God, creation, and humanity.

God of Genesis 1 is a sovereign God who acts alone. Ours is not a story about gods duking it out for power, ours is a story about one God. We often take this idea of one god for granted, but in the world in which the Hebrews lived, it was unique and counter-cultural. They lived in a polytheistic world where many gods were worshiped and honored. However, the writer of this account of creation is careful to assert the power of a single god. God is responsible for it all. There is only one actor on the stage. Even when humans are introduced, they don't have any lines. The language God uses is a royal language. God says, "Let there be ..." and there is. He commands the heavens and the earth, the waters and the animals into being, and they obey.

The author even goes out of his way to avoid any confusion that there might be other, lesser gods. In the Babylonian tradition, the name for the sun was "Shemesh," which was ironically the same name for the god of the sun ... and the same for the moon and god of the moon. If the writer of Genesis 1 said, "God created the sun and the moon," there could be confusion that God created these two gods. So instead, he calls them "two great lights" and "the greater light and lesser light." Instead of giving thanks to the god of the moon and the god of the sun for light, we look to the only God of Creation, the Sovereign One, to give thanks for light.

From the story we also learn about the goodness of creation. Over and over again we are told that creation is GOOD. When we consider the Enuma Elish and how creation is formed, it comes out of evil monsters and gods being torn in two. Creation is inherently evil. But we are told the dry land, the sea, the vegetation, the light, and all the animals were *good*. In the midst of Jewish exile, in the midst of being torn away from everything they knew, in the midst of believing they were being torn apart from God, in the midst of seeing possibly the worst of creation, the Hebrews claim that it was all intended for good. No matter the corruption, no matter how dismal the circumstances might have felt and been ... there is light in the darkness, a hope that the sovereign God is still in control and creating good in the midst of chaos.

Lastly, we look at humanity. Ourselves. What does this story have to offer about who we are and why we are here? The Babylonian story is painfully clear. Humans were created from the blood and bone of an evil god, Kingu. Their purpose? To serve an eternal sentence of slavery to the gods. Their existence was meaningless. But Genesis tells us something very different. We are created with purpose. We are created in the image of God. The Hebrews lived in a world where pictures of gods and kings were staples in a

person's household. If you wanted to know what god or king someone served, you would look for its image in their house. To say that humans are created in *God's* image, meant that in order to see who the Hebrews worshipped, you could look at their own lives. When people look at us, do they see the image of God? Do they see the purposeful life for which we were created to live?

After God creates humans, there is a commissioning. "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. God 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. And 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." We are invited to participate in the Creator's good creation. And, not only to participate in it, but to care for it as well. But how often do we forget this? How often do we toil around, living a life enslaved to the gods of this earth? How often do we feel our purpose comes from our jobs or our rankings, our good grades, the social circles we keep, our roles within our families, the money that we make or time we spend working?

There is Good News in the story of creation! We are created with a purpose much larger than our own. We are commissioned to be the stewards of the things and the people that God has created. So often, churches from every denomination have hijacked the word "stewardship" to mean an annual campaign once a year related to the needs of a budget. And it is true, that the money we faithfully return back to God and His church is a significant part of being a steward, but it is so much more. It is how we order our entire lives. It is how we care for one another. It is acknowledging with thanksgiving that *all* that we have and *all* that we are comes from the Creator of heaven and earth. And it is living our lives accordingly.

I fail at this all the time. We think that if we give away ten percent of our income, that somehow the other ninety percent is ours. We see people in our congregation struggling—emotionally, mentally, financially—and we walk away because the messiness of loving someone that deeply is more than we want to bear. We make decisions about the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the products we buy based on our selfish desires and not based on our care for the earth and its inhabitants. This commissioning, this calling is more than writing a generous check. This commissioning is about getting messy with one another. It is about being called from a place of comfort and idleness, to regain a sense of purpose in the Kingdom which is here and now.

Friends, the one, almighty, sovereign Creator of the universe and of the hairs on your head has invited you to participate with holy purpose in that Creation. We have been commissioned for something so much greater than ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.