

**Rev. Lauren Baske Davis**  
**First UCC Northfield**  
**The Four Elements Sermon Series: Water**  
**Genesis 1:1-12**  
**6.19.2022**

**Scripture**

*When God began to create*{ HYPERLINK

*"<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=NRSVUE>" \ | "fen-NRSVUE-1a" \ o "See footnote a" <sup>1</sup> the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup> the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God*{HYPERLINK

*"<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=NRSVUE>" \ | "fen-NRSVUE-2b" \ o "See footnote b" <sup>2</sup> swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup> Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. <sup>4</sup> And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup> God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

*<sup>6</sup> And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> The 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. (Listen to the reading in Hebrew at footnote).<sup>1</sup>*

**Sermon**

Today we begin our sermon series on the four elements: water, earth, fire, and air. We begin with water today. In our creation story today, the first thing, the thing that exists *before* God begins creating, is the water. Did you catch that? "When God began to create" {HYPERLINK "<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=NRSVUE>" \ | "fen-NRSVUE-1a" \ o "See footnote a" <sup>1</sup> the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup> the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God" {HYPERLINK "<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=NRSVUE>" \ | "fen-NRSVUE-2b" \ o "See footnote b" <sup>2</sup> swept over the face of the waters."

The water was with God, already there, which is to say, in the beginning, there wasn't nothingness. According to Genesis, there was water and there was God. Pastor Cindy talked with the children about how people in the Ancient Near East were curious about the world, and how they made sense of it using what they had, just like we do today. How they believed God placed a dome in the sky and the land protected creatures from the waters above and below.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1 -- Hebrew Bible Speaker video with English Captions by Ted Hildebrandt Biblicalelearning, audio read by Abraham Shmuelof, provided by the Academy of Ancient Languages. Posted April 21, 2018, accessed June 17, 2022 {HYPERLINK "<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mv3rsfKjpig>" }

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But before God began to create, there was water. The waters of the deep were already present without God speaking them into existence. Everything else was God's creation, but the waters, they were with God before light and dark, creatures, people, earth or sky.

And before we talk more about this creation story, let's talk for a moment about water. Barbara Brown Taylor riffs on water in one of her sermons. "Scientifically speaking" she says, "71 percent of the earth's surface is covered in water. The leaves from a single acre of trees can send 8,000 gallons of water into the air every day, and if you don't believe me, cut down that forest and then see what your basement looks like. 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the water circulating through the earth's atmosphere at any given time is zipped inside the bodies of living things. Both animal and vegetable. The average human body contains 5.5 gallons of water our blood is 83 percent water, every beat of our hearts depends on the chemicals in water...and none of this water is new. It was delivered over 4 billion years ago from deep space. The amount we have here has been here forever. When you drink a glass of water you are holding history. Your water has been around. Cycling around and thru this planet delivering life and death and storm and shower, trout fishing stream and flooding river to you the same way it has delivered those things to all of creation before you. Your life still comes to you straight from the deep." Remember that. Hold those notions about water with you."<sup>2</sup>

Now let's talk stories of creation for a moment. They vary of course from culture to culture, depending on what was going on in each time and place in which they were written. An Aborigine creation story tells of a Father of Spirits and a Mother Sun who gave birth to the morning star and the moon. In Mayan culture, the maker and the feathered spirit created the world with their thoughts, and then made a person out of corn. There is a Polynesian creation story that tells of the world emerging from a shell. In our very own Bible, there are different versions of creation. Genesis chapter 1 opens with the deep, and God hovering over the face of the waters. Then in chapter 2 there's a different creation story that was added later. The Gospel of John in our own newer testament tells it differently as well: "In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (NRSV).

Again, Barbara Brown Taylor notes that in Genesis, "before there is light, speech, flesh, it begins with water. In the beginning was the water," she says, "primordial, unbounded, fathomless, so capable of producing life that later when God decided to stock the seas, God let the waters do the work: 'let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures.' In this way, water became God's partner in creation as it still is" when you consider it's life giving and sustaining properties for nearly all life on earth.

We read god created the land and the waters. Two distinct things. But as much as we like to do that in life, God isn't so binary. Consider places that are not quite land and not quite water..." As one theologian wrote, it wasn't just binaries of male and female, light and dark, it was those things and so much more: "God also said 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor Talk at Chatauqua

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together into one place, and let the dry land appear. That isn't the full story. Consider marshes, swamps, bogs, and fens."<sup>3</sup> God's creativity in the beginning is profound.

Going back to all of those are different from God and the waters, in the beginning, creating. The question then isn't, "which story is true?" The question is, "What meaning is it trying to convey?" Or "how is it true?"

When Genesis was written roughly 2,600 years ago, was written as an alternative to the main, widely accepted creation story of the day, the Mesopotamian or Babylonian creation story called the *Enuma Elish*. The *Enuma Elish* was written more than 3,000 years ago. By the time Genesis came about, the *Enuma Elish* had been around for 600 years and was, according to some, the unquestioned dominant theology of the day. It was the creation story. Here's a quick summary.

There are variations to it, but here's how it goes: Two gods, Apsu and Tiamat, had children. The children were so noisy that the parent gods couldn't sleep, so they decided to kill their children. The children found out about the plot, so they killed their father, Apsu, and his corpse became the earth. The children then talk to another god, Marduk who will help the children kill their mother Tiamat, but only if he gets to be the ultimate leader, and have all of the power. Marduk kills Tiamat, and her corpse becomes the cosmos. Marduk then kills Tiamat's war general and out of his blood, human beings are created to be slaves to the gods. Marduk is worshipped.<sup>4</sup>

I am no expert on ancient Mesopotamia or Babylonians, and I have no interest in pitting two ancient cultures that I know little about against one another, nor "othering" the Babylonians for the sake of making a point. but for more than 600 years, the *Enuma Elish* was the dominant creation story. Might is considered right and people respected the gods out of fear of violence, or retribution. Humanity is a side note, created out of violent death to serve the gods. Plants and other animals aren't mentioned.

So in the year 586-7 BC(E), when it is said that the Babylonian army overtook the ancient Israelites and exiled them, the Israelites lost everything. They lost their city, their homes and land, their livelihoods, their hope, their sense of pride, their dreams. The temple had been destroyed so they lost a huge part of their faith. They became slaves. They'd lost their voice, and perhaps also any desire to sing. In that time and place, for the Israelites, everything they had was gone. What did the exiled Israelites, who had nothing, long for? What would they be thirsting for? What would be water to their dry spirits?

*This* is when the Genesis creation story comes in. This is where the water is there and God begins to create. Imagine being in exile—where you are told you are no better than the dirt on the ground—that you are something to be walked upon. And then imagine hearing a new story in whispers in the evenings before sleep. "In the beginning when God began to

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<sup>3</sup> Michaela Nicole @michaelaatencio in a viral tweet, 5:21 6/1/21 on Twitter, {[HYPERLINK "https://twitter.com/michaelaatencio"](https://twitter.com/michaelaatencio)}

<sup>4</sup> All information on *Enuma Elish* from a "Manna and Mercy" Retreat with Rev. Alan Storey at St. John's ELCA, 2017.

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"<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=NRSVUE>" \l "fen-NRSVUE-1a" \o "See footnote a"<sup>1</sup>] the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup> the earth was complete chaos,"—perhaps they would resonate with that, being in the chaos of exile. “And in that time when the earth was in complete chaos, formless and void, there was God, and the water. And God’s spirit hovered over the water. Then with the water there, God began to create. And then there was a story of a God who calms the chaos, who, with the life giving water, brings forth abundant life; the story of an earth that brought forth life of all kinds, in unimaginable amazing diversity. This was the story that began to be told. And because it was an oral tradition, people would have learned this story by heart.

Rather than hear (as they probably did everyday) that God had abandoned them, that hope was lost, that they would be slaves forever, refugees, homeless and exiled, they heard that when there was just chaos, God was alive, breathing, and water was there and out of it, God made life. And it was good. Not dirt, *good*—in the *image of God good*.

In this creation story, exiled Israelites heard that they had a God who hadn’t abandoned them, not only that, a God who could make a lot of *good* things out of chaos. A God, who in the presence of that primordial life giving water, made *them* and all of creation—*good*, valuable, beautiful—in God’s own image. And the ancient Israelites realized that God was with them.

The exiled Israelites realized, as this creation story emerged, that God was a God of love and mutual relationship. They realized that God was creating a subversive, a new perspective in the story that began with the words “In the beginning.” And as Preacher Alan Storey says, This new creation story gave them this gift: they started to believe “that God was saying, if you want to know what the real world is like, it’s about a loving God creating creation in love, for love, by love.”<sup>5</sup>

And so I want to challenge us to see the creation story as a story of God and the waters who bring life, new possibility and healing. A story given to the people to remember their belovedness. Perhaps we will see that this story of water, and God, and chaos, grows into a story of healing from the diseases of isolation, rejection, and hatred. This story gave people an opportunity to say to themselves, “If I am lovable, loved, and this is the creation story, then all are lovable and loved. And good. All the world is beloved and good.

Do you see what a different view that is? Ancient Israelites in exile people were moved, were healed, by this story. It was a cup of water when they were thirsty, a fountain rushing in a dry existence of exile, rejection, being othered and dehumanized. And even more, it invited ancient Israelites to expand life-giving belovedness to all. Let us live out the love, the life giving sustaining parts of this story, too. Let us live into our own chaos the reality of love that began with the words, “in the beginning.” Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Storey, Sermon, “Slaves and the Subversive Sabbath,” <http://cmm.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/2014-06-15.mp3>