

**Created. Beloved.**  
Menno Mennonite Church  
June 7, 2020  
Online worship

**Purpose:** to expand the creation story from one solely of factual happening to the start of the story of God and a beloved creation.

**Message:** As people of God's love and care we are called to remember where we came from and how that positions us as people of God's care, caring for God's world.

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:1-2:4

**Synopsis:** This text is an article of faith; part of the litany of facts that we recite when we talk about our faith in God. Often we use this as a backdrop of debate of the where and how of being created or not and what that means for us and for the world.

But there is a far simpler article of faith contained within that we do well to hold on to. That God with us is one and created us in care and love. Especially placed in relation to the other creation stories of the ancient near east, it is quite a contrast. Other stories are full of multiple deities who do battle with each other and that we are born of that battle, or some mistake resulting from it. Our creation story has a beloved world being populated with people to care for the creation and to have it all declared good.

How might this contrast be a reminder of our deepest roots of the earth and in hope when we are so often invited to take sides.h

When God began to create heaven and earth—  
2the earth being unformed and void,  
with darkness over the surface of the deep  
and a wind from God sweeping over the water—  
3 God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.  
4God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.  
5God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night.  
And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.

6God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water,  
that it may separate water from water.”  
7God made the expanse, and it separated the water  
which was below the expanse  
from the water which was above the expanse.  
And it was so.

8God called the expanse Sky.  
And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

9God said,  
“Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area,  
that the dry land may appear.” And it was so.

10God called the dry land Earth,  
and the gathering of waters He called Seas.  
And God saw that this was good.

11And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation:  
seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind  
on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.”  
And it was so.

12The earth brought forth vegetation:  
seed-bearing plants of every kind,  
and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it.  
And God saw that this was good.

13And there was evening and there was morning, a third day.

14God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night;  
they shall serve as signs for the set times—the days and the years;  
15and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth.”  
And it was so.

16God made the two great lights,  
the greater light to dominate the day

and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars.

17And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth,  
18to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness.

And God saw that this was good.

19And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

26And God said, "Let us make human kind in our image,  
after our likeness.

They shall rule the fish of the sea,  
the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth,  
and all the creeping things that creep on earth."

27And God created Humankind in God's image, in the image of YHWH

He created them; male and female He created them.

28God blessed them and God said to them,

"Be fertile and increase,  
fill the earth and master it;  
and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky,  
and all the living things that creep on earth."

31And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good.  
And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2 The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array.

2On the seventh day God finished the work that  
He had been doing, and ceased on the seventh day  
from all the work that He had done.

3And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy,  
because on it YHWH God ceased  
from all the work of creation that He had done.

4Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created.

How things get started matters. It matters a great deal. Every grand arching narrative has an origin story—Superman has his flight from Krypton, Spiderman his radioactive lab experiment, and on it goes. We are now exception. We want to know where we come from and why. The Bible begins as it does to set the scene, and, I think, tell us how this story will go from here on in. No matter how we engage this particular story that we have in front of us here there is little denying its importance. Here is the crux of faith and science it is argued, and unless we can get that nailed down there is not a whole lot else to talk about. Like matter and anti-matter, if one can safely use some physics in a sermon, the two simply cannot co-exist without annihilating each other. The theological debate about how it all began and what it all means generates so much heat and light that it can drive out any other engagement of the text possible. Which is why we don't often read it—and certainly not like this (and I couldn't quite justify reading the whole thing to you this morning even so).

All of which is a shame because I think it cuts us off from some fairly basic goodness that the story has to offer. The working of the Spirit; the goodness of the created universe; the unique origin of ALL peoples everywhere before the one God. There are foundational, bedrock principles of the way of God that is being set forth here, things that we can miss because we are preoccupied with the mechanism driving it all. The question of how God pulled it all off may be important because what it says about us. Yet, I would argue, also important here is the opposite question: what does the working of creation and the way forward of the creator have to say about God? That's the question that I want to take a stab at this morning—a tough ask for 20 minutes, but we'll give it a whirl all the same.

As part of my working in the desert Southwest, I had opportunity to spend time with some of the Tohono O'odham people who have space west of Tucson. It is their reservation that is bisected by the border conflicts, and it was in that context that I got to know them. Here was a people whose tie to the land was so deep they would stop and point up to the mountain top where they—their human people—were said to have been created, as in “we came out of the earth on that peak right there”. Which was a peculiar concept because being so used to the generalities of creation stories as we would have them it is never quite like that. How we got here is one of the foundational questions of human existence. Every culture, every group on some level or another has its origin story that gives the explanation of how we arrived at where we are. Menno has its people of origin coming out of Kansas through Oregon to here as the first pioneers, bringing

names many still bear. Think about the stories we tell about Columbus sailing the ocean blue in 1492, and how that story of an undiscovered country (incomplete as that fact is) has shaped us as a country. The story of Genesis is another story much like this, albeit far more consuming, of how things came to be in the world, and what that means for the community who owns this story. All of these are the stories that shape the community in many ways that are both unspoken and profound. They tell about how they came into being, what their reason is, and how they were shaped to function into the future.

But this was a story that was being told alongside other stories too. Along the time that Genesis was making the shift from oral to written tradition, Israel was held in captivity by their nemesis the Babylonian empire. They have a one of the oldest recorded creation stories there is—one of warring gods and blood being spilled and the conquered gods placing the vanquished gods to work in the less attractive occupations of running the world, the world and its elements being rent from the elements of the battle. Upon dismembering the defeated God and setting the body of that God as the sky, and the blood as a ground, the victorious god placed the people here to do similar work in the world. Most of the time, these stories end with a recitation to establish the lineage of the king of the dynasty to come from said god, establishing their right to rule.

I come here to hold to contrast the YHWH story up against it—and it could not be more stark. First, there is not a universe of gods undertaking the various levers of creation to make it all happen. There in the beginning was YHWH who created heaven and earth and called them good. Second, there is no divine right to ruling here. Sure there is Adam (a bit of a Hebrew joke to have the first human named after the earth—the *adamo*i—of which he was created) but we know that this was not bound for bigger and better things. Instead we have the story of the God working with the people—the beloved people—time and again to try to bring creation to its full flow in love and in promise. Think how much of a contrast this is to the legion of gods of the occupying empire. YHWH comes in love and creates in love, placing them in time and place within the domain of their neighborhood, which is why the locations of the rivers were so important to a desert dwelling people. Think about hearing this story in the context where the other story dominates and demands attention. It would tell you something about God. It would tell you something about who the people of God are supposed to be. Instead of setting the world up to serve the needs of the king, we are given a world where the created one are all the kings and queens of the earth. There is even a Talmudic saying—the recording of long Jewish

thought—which teaches that as a person makes their way in the world, angels walk before them and proclaim, “Make way for an icon of the Blessed Holy One.” How is that for a reordering of the world that we see each and every day. It might be something to consider about the person who cut you off in traffic is not so much a jerk as an icon of YHWH God.

I must pick up one more element—a sermon on its own right, but I cannot leave it out. Note also that the text uses time and again the citation of “every kind” of animal and plant throughout this litany of the creation. but does not do so for humans but links us to but two individuals. Friends, this is the deep theological truth of our very core that we MUST learn time and again. God’s creation has but one kind of human; all other structures are of our vanity and, yes, sin perfected over centuries. Racism denies the truth of the created order; the more often we can but claim this simply element of our creation, and to live by its consequence, the better we shall be. This has to be our confession and our hope, always.

As much as Genesis 1 tells us about how we are created, I think it more so tells us about how we have been formed. It is that formation of people of the creating God that I think we do well to standardize, value, and teach every bit as much as the particularities of physics and all the rest. The creation is the prime example of God’s love for us, and God’s identity in the workings of the universe. I think it is important to involve God not only in those things we cannot explain, the gaps in our knowledge, but also in the wondrous things that we do know. If we make God so jealous of the secrets of the universe that there is no room for us to even dwell within it, we miss the point of this whole story—that this; all this; is good. That God creates a world in love and for shalom existence—peace, wholeness, completeness, goodness. This world provides what is needed; so much in fact that we are invited once a week to simply lay down and rest within it. God places us into this world with the very spark of God’s own image, and invites us into creation. Is shalom here, now? No it’s a long way off. But that doesn’t change the fact that this is what all of this is all about—living out God’s peace. And all of this is good. We forget this because we forget that THIS is where we came from, and it to this we are going yet again. All of which is precisely why we must reclaim the goodness of the story that is our, that is good, and that will in time be lived completely.

We so often find the world in competition fear, and loathing. We are tempted to think that this is the world to which we really belong. But that is not our story—God’s story. The God we encounter from page one is the God in whom we live and move and have our being, the God

who rejoices over His children with signing, the God who spreads Her wings over Her children like an hen over her chicks, the God who loved the world enough to experience all of its pain alongside of us, a God who loves just to watch us play, be curious, ask questions. We cannot learn our way out of God's love and care. Because God created a world that was good, and God made us who we are to relish, enjoy and embrace God's grace, whether it is found in the smallest sub-atomic particle or the greatest distance of the universe.

God so loved the world that he placed us within its beauty, not to shelter us from what is, but to invite us to come and play, and be embraced by the joy of truth, where ever it might be found. May this shape us this day and every day. Amen.