

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Last week we completed our series on the Revelation of John of Patmos. You may be surprised to discover that there is a connection between the Revelation and the creation story in Genesis. The Bible starts with Genesis and ends with Revelation.

John's visions of monsters are modelled on creation stories even older than those in Genesis. Many scholars have pointed out that the opening chapters of Genesis were written considerably later than many other biblical writings - probably about *four hundred years* later than the chapters that follow - and later than some of the psalms. Yet, whoever wrote the opening of Genesis probably *knew* the ancient dragon story, for Genesis says that even before God created the world, he began not with *nothing*, as Jewish and Christian theologians and philosophers later claimed, but with a formless void, chaos, wind, and "deep waters."

The creation story can be traced to ancient Babylonia, where priests inscribed it in cuneiform on clay tablets more than 2,500 years ago - a story probably told for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years before that. The story tells how, "in the beginning" or even *before* the beginning of time, God fought against a great sea monster, the dragon of chaos, to bring forth the world. The Babylonian version tells how the sun god Marduk fought his mother the great female dragon Tiamat, and her army of monsters, who embodied the ocean depths, the dangerous power of chaos. When Tiamat opened her huge jaws to devour him, Marduk drove the four winds into

her mouth, distending her body, then split her in two “like a shrimp” to create from her the earth and sky, and placed them under his own dominion.

Nearly three thousand years ago, Israel’s poets and storytellers familiar with such ancient stories, began to tell how Israel’s God, like Marduk, fought against a many-headed dragon, a sea monster whom they called by such names as Leviathan and Rahab. Some said that only after crushing and killing such monsters could God, like Marduk, establish the world and deliver it from the powers of chaos.

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was *a formless void [or chaos] and darkness covered the surface of the deep waters*, while a wind from God swept over the waters.

Some people thought that this ancient story implied that God’s power is limited, since it suggests that God, like Marduk, had to contend with a supernatural antagonist *before* he could create the world. Israel’s storytellers, perhaps to reassure their hearers that God’s power is uncontested, morphed the sea monster Timat into *tehom*, the Hebrew term for the “depths”, the primordial sea over which they say that “wind from God” moved “in the beginning”. Then, to show that no sea monsters lurked in those primordial waters, the Genesis account says that Israel’s God actually created the great sea monsters - and did so only *after* he created all the other sea creatures, on the *fifth* day of creation.

“When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was wild and waste, utter darkness covered the deep, and the Spirit of God was brooding over the

face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light!' And there was light." This is a story not so much about creation-out-of-nothing but about creation out of a world that is wild and waste, formless and void.

While the Babylonian story pictures the great sea monster as *female*, the "mother of all monsters" and of all gods, Hebrew storytellers often speak of Leviathan as male. Others suggest that when God created the sea monsters on the fifth day of creation, he made them, like all other animals, in pairs: Leviathan, a female monster from the sea, and Behemoth, a male monster from the land - apparently a version of the story that John of Patmos adapted to tell, in his Revelation, how the dragon's two allies emerged, first the "beast from the sea" and then the "beast from the land".

Our creation story does not describe the world of ancient Near Eastern creation myths, where the gods have to defeat the sea or the sea dragon in order to create the earth. There is only one God in Genesis, and that God is the Creator of everything, including the sea monsters themselves. There is no chaos-monster that must be defeated. Nevertheless, there is "the deep", the watery abyss. These primordial waters comprise the symbol of chaos in many ancient Near Eastern stories, including some biblical accounts.

Now the "fathers" of the church, especially Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, read the Bible as if it were one continuous book written presumably by God. That is why they called the bible "the Word of God". They had no

understanding, as we have come to learn in the last two hundred years, of the relationship between various parts of the biblical story to history, or to one another. The book of Genesis, with which the Bible opens, is, as we now know, the composite of at least four Jewish sources written over a period of up to six hundred years. It is not a single story in which one event followed another in sequential order. For example, the story of creation in seven days that forms the bulk of the first chapter of Genesis comes from the pen or pens of the priestly writers, who expanded the Hebrew scriptures dramatically during the Babylonian exile of the late sixth century BCE, basing the seven day story on the Babylon myth of creation.

In this late-developing creation story, two things are of particular note. First, creation, in this depiction, was the act of God, and therefore all created things, including human life, were perfect and complete. Second, God created the world *ex nihilo*, so that not only was creation good, but the material out of which creation was forged was also good. In the dramatic Genesis poem, God first looked out on all that God had made and pronounced it good. Then God completed the creation and declared the Sabbath day to be a day of rest. The world had been made. Creation was complete, and God had called it good.

The verses in the second chapter of Genesis that continue where we left off today, tell the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, and the Garden of Eden - a story written probably in the middle years of the tenth century BCE, or some four hundred-plus years before the creation story or the first chapter of Genesis.

It obviously did not follow on from the first chapter. Augustine, who assumed that Genesis 1 was chapter 1 in a book that contained the literal words of God, and that Genesis 2 was the second chapter in the same book, put the two chapters together and read the latter as a sequel. So almost inevitably the Christian scriptures from the fourth century on were interpreted against the background of this complete misunderstanding.

The primary trouble with this theory was that by the fourth century of the Common Era there were no Jews to speak of left in the Christian movement, and therefore the only readers and interpreters of the ancient Hebrew myths were Gentiles, who had no idea what these stories originally meant. The great majority of the world's Christians no longer understood or cared about the original Jewish worldview in which these Genesis stories had been created. They were Greek-speaking Gentiles, not Hebrew-speaking mythmakers. As Greeks, they saw the world not as a unity but as a duality, which greatly influenced the interpretation of the Garden of Eden story. Good was separate from evil. God was separate from the world. Bodies and souls were antithetical, or opposite, concepts. Flesh and spirit were in dualistic war waged within each one of us. That became the matrix in which what we now call "traditional Christianity" came to be understood.

The problem facing the church today is that this fourth-century understanding of Christianity is dying before our eyes. It no longer translates into anything that we know or understand about life. It no longer seems relevant to our minds. Because we know no alternatives to the ancient pattern, however, we watch Christianity being

split today into two mutually exclusive halves, neither of which can tolerate the other. One half insists on literalizing the ancient Hebrew stories, making them mean something they were never intended to mean, while the other half dismisses everything that its adherents see as “religious content” as so much nonsense. Sadly, neither side makes the effort to explore and understand these ancient myths and their place in the history of the world.

To our modern ears, this Genesis reading can sound “fantastical”. God sitting in some heavenly court making all things with an almost whimsical playfulness. “Let’s make light!” And it is so. “Let’s make land!” And it is so. “Let’s make animals.” And it is so.

Yet more than whimsy, we see that a certain order and relationship unveils over the days of creation. Light and darkness, land and sea, vegetation and animals. Throughout this story we have the Creating God announcing, “It is good!” And by the end, after six days of making all things, this same God proclaims – perhaps with a giddy delight – “it is supremely good!”

The Creation is a story of relationship – of God the Creator to the creation, and of the various parts of creation to itself. Earth to vegetation, vegetation to animals, humanity to the animals and land it is called to care for. All of creation was made in love and goodness as an interconnected whole. We have a relationship and a responsibility to our fellow creations and to our Creator. As we read through the Bible, we’ll see that humanity, time and again, falls short of its relationships and

responsibilities. By Genesis Chapter 3 we're lying, and by Genesis Chapter 4 we're murdering. But what happens later doesn't negate how it all began – in goodness and in love.

Wherever we are, God is there, loving us, nurturing us, drawing us into the joy of God's life and love. Unfortunately, there are many people in this world who really do not believe that. Traditional religion has tended to promote the idea that God is essentially estranged from us. God is "up there", distant, remote, and unconcerned. We have to do something very, very special to get God's attention, and even then, we may or may not succeed. That may work for some people. But that way of looking at God is not very satisfying. We don't want a God who may come around for brief and fleeting encounters - any more than we want a spouse who comes by for a visit once in a blue moon! We want a God who's always there for us, and that's the way the Bible depicts God for us.

The witness of Scripture is that God is with us all continuously. The Bible uses the language of the Spirit to express this conviction. It describes the Spirit of God as "hovering" or "resonating" over the world as it is being formed and ordered by God's creative Word. From the very beginning, God has been fully present to everyone and everything in this world. And God is still with us because the Spirit of God still "hovers" and "resonates" over and around and in us all.

The idea that God is constantly with us all through the Spirit's presence is one that pervades human spiritual and religious experience. We have used many names

for this “presence” throughout the centuries — the ancient Chinese called it “Chi”. Buddhists spoke of it as an emptiness that connects us all together! Whatever the word for it, religions of all kinds have by and large operated from the conviction that there is a powerful spiritual life force that pervades and upholds and fills everything.

Many of these religious and spiritual traditions use breathing as a means of quieting the distractions that compete for our attention, encountering the presence of something greater than ourselves. When the Hebrew Bible speaks of the Spirit of God hovering over all things at the beginning of creation, the word for “Spirit” is the same word as the “breath” that is later breathed into human beings to bring them to life! In a very real sense, the various spiritual traditions in our world echo the biblical conviction that the Spirit hovers over all creation, resonating with all living beings, giving them breath, and filling them with the life-giving presence of God.

The biblical story of creation teaches us that from the very beginning, God has been right here. And God is still right here with us all. Even when we don’t feel like God is anywhere near us, God is never any farther away from us than the very breath we fill our lungs with. All we have to do to become aware that God is right here with us is to just breathe! Wherever we are, God is always here.

Goodness and love continue throughout the 50 chapters of Genesis and the 66 books of the Bible. God’s goodness and love will constantly intervene in our brokenness, show us mercy and grace, and return to us again and again even when we do our best to sever our relationship with God and fail in our holy responsibility

to care for each other and for creation.

The Creation story tells us a story about God taking formlessness, emptiness, and darkness and breathing life into all the nothingness. On the surface, It's a story about God taking nothing and turning it into something. Formlessness to the formed. Emptiness to the filled. Darkness replaced with light. Nothing to something with purpose.

So why did this passage endure? The Creation story speaks to our beginnings and ultimately what's sacred – all life. It tells us about this moment in time where, as some have put it, Creation happened out of an overflow of God's love. It has endured because it tells a story about a God who has always been a God of the resurrection. God can always take nothing, formlessness, lifelessness, shapelessness and breathe meaning into it.

God is a God of goodness and love who created a world for relationship with Godself and with God's awesome creation. But most important, God is always there over, with, and among us and his good creation.

Amen.