

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Origin Stories: Where We Come From

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

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Genesis 1:1-2:3 Common English Bible (CEB)

1 When God began to create the heavens and the earth— **2** the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God’s wind swept over the waters— **3** God said, “Let there be light.” And so light appeared. **4** God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God named the light Day and the darkness Night.

There was evening and there was morning: the first day.

6 God said, “Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters to separate the waters from each other.” **7** God made the dome and separated the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome. And it happened in that way. **8** God named the dome Sky.

There was evening and there was morning: the second day.

9 God said, “Let the waters under the sky come together into one place so that the dry land can appear.” And that’s what happened. **10** God named the dry land Earth, and he named the gathered waters Seas. God saw how good it was. **11** God said, “Let the earth grow plant life: plants yielding seeds and fruit trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind throughout the earth.” And that’s what happened. **12** The earth produced plant life: plants yielding seeds, each according to its kind, and trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind. God saw how good it was.

13 There was evening and there was morning: the third day.

14 God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night. They will mark events, sacred seasons, days, and

years. ¹⁵ They will be lights in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth.” And that’s what happened. ¹⁶ God made the stars and two great lights: the larger light to rule over the day and the smaller light to rule over the night. ¹⁷ God put them in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw how good it was.

¹⁹ There was evening and there was morning: the fourth day.

²⁰ God said, “Let the waters swarm with living things, and let birds fly above the earth up in the dome of the sky.” ²¹ God created the great sea animals and all the tiny living things that swarm in the waters, each according to its kind, and all the winged birds, each according to its kind. God saw how good it was. ²² Then God blessed them: “Be fertile and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth.”

²³ There was evening and there was morning: the fifth day.

²⁴ God said, “Let the earth produce every kind of living thing: livestock, crawling things, and wildlife.” And that’s what happened. ²⁵ God made every kind of wildlife, every kind of livestock, and every kind of creature that crawls on the ground. God saw how good it was. ²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.”

²⁷ God created humanity in God’s own image,
in the divine image God created them,
male and female God created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.” ²⁹ Then God said, “I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food. ³⁰ To all wildlife, to all the birds in the sky, and to everything crawling on the

ground—to everything that breathes—I give all the green grasses for food.” And that’s what happened. ³¹ God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good.

There was evening and there was morning: the sixth day.

2 The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. ² On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done. ³ God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creation.

(Break for first service for response to God’s word)

Scripture is a challenging reality in the church of today, and for us as Methodists we need to take some time to understand what scripture means for us to understand our call from Christ.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist way of being Christian loved dearly the scripture found in 2 Timothy to understand the role of scripture in the community.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁶ Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, ¹⁷ so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

While this might seemingly point to scripture meaning the entire Bible, as we receive it is all inspired by God. It is important to remember our current Bible was not put together until nearly 400 CE. This passage in 2 Timothy referred to the holy text of the community it was written for. A reminder that while we have one Bible now, that holy texts have

change throughout time. They have taken time to come together and to be molded into what we have today.

John Wesley goes on to say, “We know, ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ and is therefore true and right concerning all things. But we know likewise that there are some Scriptures which more immediately commend themselves to every [person’s] conscience.”¹

Meaning for us as Christians there will be parts of our Bible that attach more closely to our own conscious, our own call from God to let go of those things that separate us from God, sin, and to embrace a creator and God who lets us know we are loved.

Wesley finally says in a commentary on 1st John “We love [God] because he first loved us” — is “the sum of the whole gospel.”

Meaning the thing we should go to the gospel with is an understanding first that God is love, and that God has loved us before the cosmos and will love us after.

Our scripture today reminds us that God from creation on, had a love for life and finding ways to create it from the chaos. If we take time to understand the historical context within which this scripture was written down, we will learn it meant even more than life to some the original people who carried this creation story that we have adopted as our own.

I want to share a story for us, drawn from scripture and found in the study book we are using this year. It leans heavily on the Jewish custom of midrash, of taking the stories of the Bible and using learned insight to understand the story between the stories.

The Shabbat meal had been completed, and the smell of the bread was still in the air when the young girl burst through the door. “Where is

¹ <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/quinquag/WesleyEpistle1.html>

your brother?" A mother cleaning out a clay cup asks with the voice of a knowing mother.

The young girl Hannah says, "I couldn't find him. I went down by the river Chebar shouting his name." She shouts "Haggai," so her mother can get a clue of how loud she was shouting. As her mother gives her that motherly look to quiet down, Hannah recalls in her mind running throughout the village of *Al-Yahudu*, "the village of the Jews," looking for her brother.

Hannah makes her way over to her father's feet, excited to hear the evening stories. Her mother is muttering something about where Haggai might be, something about him being old enough to be an archer in the Babylonian army soon and her concern about the kind of people he will be around.

Just as Hannah's father was about to start a story Haggai burst through the door.

"I was in the city!"

"As I feared," says his mother.

Haggai then shares, "I was in the city and there was a party. They were celebrating Marduk, their God who overcame all to be the most supreme God and take the throne in the temple."

Mother and Father both took a deep breath and looked at each other. Their people had once had a temple too.

Then Haggai told a story of Marduk,

"In the beginning, before the heaven and earth were named, there lived two wild and capricious gods: Tiamat, goddess of salt water, and Apsu, god of freshwater. These two gods mingled together to produce many other gods, filling the whole cosmos with clamor and chaos. Nothing was in its

right place. “When the younger gods grew so noisy that Apsu couldn’t sleep, he resolved to kill each one of them.

A battle ensued, but instead of quieting the noise, Apsu faltered and was killed by Ea, father of the great Marduk. “Enraged, Tiamat advanced on Marduk and his forces, backed by a massive army of demons and monsters, hurricanes and hounds. “But Marduk was a valiant warrior, so he challenged his great-great grandmother to do battle alone with him. The two fought and fought until Marduk captured Tiamat in a net and drove a great wind into her mouth so that she became bloated and slow. Marduk shot an arrow into Tiamat’s belly, cutting through her insides and puncturing her heart. Then he split her body into two pieces, flinging half of the corpse into the heavens to hold back the waters behind the firmament, and the other half to the earth to hold back the waters that rage below. From her hollowed eyes flowed the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

“Then Marduk made the stars and moon and assigned the gods to various duties. He put everything in order—sky, land, plants, and animals. Among the gods he took the highest place, and from the blood of his enemies he created humanity to serve as their slaves. Finally, Marduk saw that a great temple was made in his honor, a temple from which he could rule and rest.

“He lives in the temple, right here in Babylon, to this day,” Haggai concludes. “And the king is his emissary.”²

The story hung in the air. Then the father piped up and shared a story with Haggai and Hannah about a God who took chaos and created land, and sea, sky and earth, birds, animals, humans in God’s image, food to eat, and rested on the 7th day. The story was deep and long and full of the depth of knowing that God creates not by destruction, but by offering new life.

At the end of the moment Haggai hung his head low, for he remembered that his people had once had a temple and in the excitement of the city he forgot where he came from and was thankful for his father’s story.

The Bible we know, the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible “was forged during a crisis of faith.”³ I would dare to say all of our holy texts generally are forged out of a deep need of the people to wonder where God is in their extremes of life. These ancient scriptures from the Hebrew Bible began to be compiled during the reign of King David, accelerated when the Babylonian Empire began invading, and were maintained through the exile of the Jewish people from their land by that same empire in the 6th century BCE.

The crisis of faith that forged our scriptures was that exile, the people were cast out of their land. Forced to march hundreds of miles. The

² Evans, Rachel Held. *Inspired* (pp. 2-3). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.
The surrounding story is a paraphrase of Rachel Held Evans work adapted for time in worship

³ Evans, Rachel Held. *Inspired* (p. 7). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

temple where they believed God resided was destroyed and they wondered where their God was. Faithful people like Hannah and Haggai's father held on to the tales in word, song, and story for the day when they would be free again. Free to share of a God who took the chaos of the cosmos and called it to order.

Here are words from Psalm 137:1-6 that capture the pain and suffering of the people who maintained what is the first part of scriptures and the scriptures that sustained Jesus in his ministry.

Psalm 137:1-6 Common English Bible (CEB)

137 Alongside Babylon's streams,

there we sat down,

crying because we remembered Zion.

²We hung our lyres up

in the trees there

³ because that's where our captors asked us to sing;

our tormentors requested songs of joy:

"Sing us a song about Zion!" they said.

⁴But how could we possibly sing

the Lord's song on foreign soil?

⁵Jerusalem! If I forget you,

let my strong hand wither!

⁶Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth

if I don't remember you,

if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy.

Origin stories help us understand who we are in the chaos of life. If you ask any modern person about origin stories they know one either in their personal life or in popular culture. Many people know that Luke and Leia Skywalker has a famous father, that superman was born on Krypton, that Hermione Granger in Harry Potter comes from parents

that are not wizards, and that George Washington was so honest that he told his father he cut down the....cherry tree.

We love these stories because we can find ourselves somewhere in them. Not that we are them, but a part of the human spirit comes alive when we accentuate the situation and narrate the powerful beginning from whence we come.

I remember growing up and going hunting with my father, I have shared some of those adventures with us all before. Climbing into a red 1990 Toyota pickup that was too small for two 6 foot tall men and driving at 3am half way across Montana to seek out Elk and Deer in the foothills off the Yellowstone and Boulder rivers. In that small truck cab as we bounced along mountain roads that some would not dare take a four wheeler on my dad would share stories of our family. I would hear the origins of my family.

The story of his birth in a log cabin in Glendive, Montana, the exodus of my family from Glendive to Billings, a long stay in Livingston and finally owning the bar in Three Forks, Montana. Harrowing tales of 40 years in a cement plant with machines bigger than any man should be able to imagine. I heard of working for the forest service to fight fires, back country hunting, chainsaws in the shoulder, motorcycle accidents burning holes in knees and dancing on that knee until midnight. I heard love stories, and sad stories. Stories of ranchers fighting, and ponderings if God's 7 days were really seven days or eons of time each.

Always, I was struck by my wondering how I fit in these stories. What role I was to play in the history of my family and the people I was a part of. It was as if my father was imparting the truth that, "Tyler you are a part of this story, trust that you are a loved part of what is happening in this creation."

Then I would hear in my home Methodist church the stories of scriptures, of Methodists on the frontier, of building hospitals, and orphanages, and colleges and churches. I would hear of Jesus nearly being thrown off cliffs, of his family rejecting him, calling a group of misfit disciples, and how they changed the world. I wondered if those people still existed, those legends in the story, who would they be today.

In all these stories, we are invited to wonder where we stand, where we hope to be and what God might be doing with us. I can tell you that the first trap we have to avoid is believing we are any one character in the stories we read. When we read scripture, or are called to it by our God we need to trust that we might be pieces or the opposite character in the story than we thought we were. We could be Cain or we could be Able, we could Order or Chaos, or we could be Babylon or the Jews. Or a little of all the above. Our own unique period in time draws us into the roles we are called to play. And God invites us to seek the life giving, unending water, route of the soul that brings an end to thirst, and pain. The message Jesus asks us to impart from these stories is a message of "You, you are a part of this story, trust that you are a loved part of what is happening in God's creation. Learn from the failures in these stories and the hope gleaned from them."

Origin stories like the one we find in Genesis 1, or the others we find in the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible, and throughout scripture are meant to help us question who we are. They are not meant to be quick answers to scientific questions about where we came from, they do not answer the origin of the universe questions, but they do help us know that when a people was rejected and forced into slavery they held onto hope that God created them not to be ruled over in creation, but to be a part of the story of creation.

Rachel Held Evans who writes the book for our study this summer, puts it this way:

“Remember how in the beginning, God put everything in order and made the whole cosmos a temple? Remember how we are created in God’s image, as stewards, not slaves? Remember how Adam and Eve disobeyed, how Cain and Abel fought, how all the people of the earth grew so rebellious and cruel that God regretted creating the world in the first place? Remember how one family’s faithfulness was enough to save them from the Great Flood? Remember how God promised an elderly Abraham his descendants would outnumber the stars? Remember how Sarah laughed? Remember how God chose a peopleless nomad, a second-born son, a stuttering runaway, and a little shepherd boy to create, liberate, and rule a nation? Remember how that nation is named for a man who limped from wrestling with God? Remember how God saw the suffering of the banished Hagar, the unloved Leah, and the oppressed Hebrew slaves? Remember how Pharaoh’s mighty army drowned in the sea? Remember the desert? Remember the manna? Remember the water from rock? Remember how it is our God who said, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1 NRSV)? Remember how this God has been faithful?”⁴

We are called in scripture to remember how God has been faithful to us, and that is all we can demand of the Bible. We cannot place ourselves into the story as one character and not the other. This is why John Wesley believed we needed to study scripture in groups that asked us to be accountable to one another.

⁴ Evans, Rachel Held. *Inspired* (pp. 12-13). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Friends, we cannot demand that the origins fit us and the age of doing this with scripture needs to end with the current one. Instead, we need to take our interests out of the story and hope in the fervent truth that we are being written into the family story of God, by being faithful and true to who God has loved us to be. Children of Christ who was in the beginning and in the end and in all of history telling us to love one another as God loved life into the chaos at creation.