

“Let There Be Light”

A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera Koren

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Intro

Last year at the congregation I serve, we spent the month of May considering the theme of Creation. We had a Beltane service. Beltane: a pagan celebration of fertility as spring ripens toward summer.

And then one about the divine mother; divine feminine energy. It included stories of Oshun, from the Yoruba tradition who transforms herself into a vulture, flies past the sun, and brings sweet water down to earth to protect and sustain life; and of Shakti, from the Hindu tradition, who angered Shiva when she woke him up, and used the energy of his fury as she created a new world; and of Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century Christian mystic, who spoke of God as a mother.

There was a service about the Big Bang, the scientific story that is as rich as any ancient myth or parable I’ve ever heard. One hundred billion galaxies! And out of the waters in this one: bacteria, algae, jellyfish, trilobites, shellfish, and sharks... life’s creaturely ancestors.

And the last week that month happened to be the week of Shavuot, the Jewish holiday that celebrates of the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. The Torah, which begins with Bereshit, Genesis.

Most UUs are familiar with the creation story in Genesis. Unfortunately, in the current US cultural climate, it is invoked to support fundamentalism (“it’s adam and eve, not adam and steve!”) and to support exploitation and domination (“god gave man dominion over the earth and everyone else on it”). And the story is invoked implicitly, in the idea that women are responsible for tempting men into bad behavior, just as Eve gives Adam a forbidden fruit. If you have ever been told, nonsensically, that as a woman you should dress modestly to avoid being harmed by a man, you know what I’m talking about.

There are many varieties of Christianity, and the progressive ones certainly do not agree with these things. But unfortunately, those tend not to be the loudest voices. And the loudest Christian voices about Genesis tend to take it very literally, as in this story really happened six thousand years ago and there were no trilobites because those went extinct 250 million years ago and 250 million years ago never happened. But that’s a fundamentalist Christian take on what is originally a Jewish text.

So for our consideration tonight, I’d like to begin with a reading from Genesis Chapter 1, and the first few lines of chapter 2. Even if you think you know it well, I invite you to listen to it with fresh ears, noticing if there are things you had forgotten or never noticed.

Reading

(Appended at end of sermon).

Message

The earth was astonishingly empty. First God makes light and then separates it from the darkness- so it was combined before? What did that look like? What is light if it can be mixed with dark? God separates water from water, and the space in between is called the heavens. So, in this story, it sounds like above the sky, there is more water out there. Perhaps this explains why water falls through the atmosphere. Then dry land, then plants. After the plants, the sun, moon, and stars. Sea creatures and birds then other animals. And finally, humans, made in the image of God. And on the seventh day, at the end of Chapter 2 verse 4, God rests.

But you know.... It doesn't actually end there. The story does something puzzling next. It kind of... rewinds? Even though everything has just been completed, in the very next verse, verse 5, the text says, "Now there was no" tree, or herb, or people on the earth. And then god makes a man out of dust and divine breath or spirit. And then makes a bunch of animals to try to keep the man company, but the man is still lonely, and so God makes the man fall into a deep sleep, and then "takes one of the man's sides" and makes a partner, a woman.

So, there are two stories about people and animals being created. In the first, God seems to make two humans at once. In the second, it seems like maybe God intends to make only one human but decides a second one is needed.

So, what are we supposed to make of that?

Ancient rabbis surmised that perhaps the two stories are not two different stories at all, rather the second one is an elaboration on the first. In the first story, as we heard, the text says that God creates people in Gods image, "male and female God created them." Ancient rabbis suggested that perhaps this first human being was both male and female.

This isn't a big leap, theologically, because in addition to male and female, ancient Jewish texts describe four other genders. They appear hundreds of times in writings about laws, marriage, inheritance, rituals, and other issues.

Modern Rabbi Elliot Kukla explains,

When a child was born in the ancient Jewish world it could be designated as a boy, a girl, a "tumtum" (who is neither clearly male nor female), or an "androgynos" (who has both male and female characteristics) based on physical features. There are two more gender designations that form later in life. The "aylonit" is considered female at birth but develops in an atypical direction. The "saris" is designated male at birth, but later becomes a eunuch.ⁱ

Kukla notes that these ancient categories are not the exact equivalents of modern gender identities. But they make clear that nonbinary and gender diverse people have always existed and have always been recognized by Judaism.

So, it makes sense that perhaps the first human to appear in the creation story was more than we thought. Some ancient Jewish interpretations of this story imagine that the first human had two faces, one on the front and one on the back.

So then consider this: in chapter 2, we've often heard it said that God causes Adam to fall asleep and then uses "Adam's rib" to make Eve. But another way to translate the Hebrew is that as he slept, "God took one of his sides."

God takes one of Adam's sides. One side apart from the other side, separating the first person into male and female.

That's a different perspective on a familiar story, from the people who told it first, the Jewish people.

The legend of Lilith is another Jewish legend that explains the two stories, in a totally different way. According to that legend, the woman in the first story is Lilith, not Eve. Lilith had long hair and wings, and she considered herself Adam's equal. But Adam kept trying to dominate her. When she grew tired of it, she stormed off, out of the garden, muttering god's forbidden name as she left. She goes on to become the mother of demons. She torments people in some classic medieval ways, and appears in Jewish supernatural folklore, including as a spirit that travels through mirrors. She also became a feminist icon, and the independent Jewish feminist magazine Lilith is named after her.

Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow adds to the legend in her book called *The Coming of Lilith*. Plaskow tells a story about Eve catching a glimpse of Lilith.ⁱⁱ Eve had heard terrible things about her, had even heard that she was a demon. Once, when Lilith tries to re-enter the garden, Adam gets nervous and builds a bigger wall, enlisting Eve to help him. But he can't stop the two from meeting. And when Eve finally spots Lilith, to her surprise what she sees is not a scary demon, but a woman, like herself. She had never seen another woman before, and she admires her. She looks so strong and brave.

After thinking about this for a long time, Eve gathers up her courage and swings herself over the wall. Before long, she finds Lilith. "Who are you?" they ask each other. And the two of them talk for hours. This happens not once, but many times, Plaskow writes. The women speak of the past, and the future. They teach each other many things, and tell each other stories, and laugh together, and cry, over and over, until a bond of sisterhood grows between them. Finally, Eve leads Lilith back into the garden. Adam and God, having sensed that something was changing, are unsettled yet expectant, when they see that the two women are filled with a great sense of possibility, ready to rebuild paradise together.

At the heart of Judaism is a tradition of wrestling with and debating the meaning of holy texts and teachings, and of haggadot, which are legends, parables, and anecdotes that illustrate points of Jewish teachings. So, you have just heard a couple of those.

What is the value of continuing to tell ancient creation stories? And to dream about them, retell and elaborate on them? Especially when we have such an incredible scientific one now, right? Creation stories are by definition about the past—at least on their surface. They are about how something that exists now was created. But they are much more than that. They aren't just about how one world was created one time. They may also serve to teach us about how worlds are created, all the time.

All our lives, worlds are dying and new worlds are being created all the time. On the micro level. That's you. You're micro. You're not that big of a deal compared to 100 billion galaxies. But it is big for you when your personal world collapses and a new one is made. And worlds are dying, and new worlds are being created on larger levels, too. We are living in an in-between time in the history of humankind. Human made systems that are unsustainable are accelerating toward their inevitable conclusion. Systems of domination and oppression are being dismantled, and we see a backlash against that, a crackdown of oppressive laws; laws that encroach on the most private parts of our bodies and our lives, laws that constrain and control, and laws that are meant to prevent people from even *talking* about being gay or trans or about systemic racism.

There's this struggle between an old world that is trying very desperately—to the point of frenzy and violence—to hang on, and a new world that is right now, right at this moment, being made. It's being made when what was never life sustaining in the old one, begins to crack and break. It's being made when we actively work toward it—when we nurture resilience, when we embrace change, when we draw the circle wider, when we show up and speak up, when we muster up our courage. The new world is made when we feel fearful, and instead of letting fear stop us, we let it motivate us. The new world is made when we rest, knowing that we aren't trying to make a new world out of exhaustion, anxiety, and death, but out of relationships, wellness, and sustainability.

Creation stories contain time tested wisdom to guide our way. From Beltane: all that we need is already growing on fertile ground: tend that and celebrate that. Make bonfires as big as your joy. From the divine feminine: there is a source of nurturing and protection. It may show up unexpectedly. Receive it. From the Big Bang, we are reminded that wherever we think we are in the grand scheme, there is still more world to come. What we do now is shaping it. It will evolve from and reflect those who adapt. Those who do not adapt will become a dry bed of fossils. And in Genesis, we have a story of improvisation. The process of creation involves trying things out, and seeing whether they are good. And reserving the right to make adjustments or even start over, if that is what is needed.

Genesis 1-2:4

1 In the beginning of God's creation of the heavens and the earth.

2 Now the earth was astonishingly empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the water.

3 And God said, "**Let there be light,**" and there was light.

4 And God saw the light that it was good, and God separated between the light and between the darkness.

5 And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night, and it was evening and it was morning, one day.

6 And God said, "**Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, and let it be a separation between water and water.**"

7 And God made the expanse and it separated between the water that was below the expanse and the water that was above the expanse, and it was so.

8 And God called the expanse Heaven, and it was evening, and it was morning, a second day.

9 And God said, "**Let the water that is beneath the heavens gather into one place, and let the dry land appear,**" and it was so.

10 And God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas, and God saw that it was good.

11 And God said, "**Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed yielding herbs and fruit trees producing fruit according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth,**" and it was so.

12 And the earth gave forth vegetation, seed yielding herbs according to its kind, and trees producing fruit, in which its seed is found, according to its kind, and God saw that it was good.

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

14 And God said, "**Let there be luminaries in the expanse of the heavens, to separate between the day and between the night, and they shall be for signs and for appointed seasons and for days and years.**

15 **And they shall be for luminaries in the expanse of the heavens to shed light upon the earth.**" And it was so.

16 And God made the two great luminaries: the great luminary to rule the day and the lesser luminary to rule the night, and the stars.

17 And God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to shed light upon the earth.

18 And to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate between the light and between the darkness, and God saw that it was good.

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

20 And God said, "**Let the waters swarm a swarming of living creatures, and let fowl fly over the earth, across the expanse of the heavens.**"

21 And God created the great sea monsters, and every living creature that crawls, with which the waters swarmed, according to their kind, and every winged fowl, according to its kind, and God saw that it was good.

22 And God blessed them, saying, "**Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters of the seas, and let the fowl multiply upon the earth.**"

23 And it was evening, and it was morning, a fifth day.

24 And God said, "**Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kind, cattle and creeping things and the beasts of the earth according to their kind,**" and it was so.

25 And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kind and the cattle according to their kind, and all the creeping things of the ground according to their kind, and God saw that it was good.

26 And God said, "**Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.**"

27 And God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

28 And God blessed them, and God said to them, "**Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth.**"

29 And God said, "**Behold, I have given you every seed bearing herb, which is upon the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit; it will be yours for food.**

30 **And to all the beasts of the earth and to all the fowl of the heavens, and to everything that moves upon the earth, in which there is a living spirit, every green herb to eat,**" and it was so.

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

Chapter 2

1 Now the heavens and the earth were completed and all their host.

2 And God completed on the seventh day His work that He did, and He abstained on the seventh day from all His work that He did.

3 And God blessed the seventh day and He hallowed it, for thereon He abstained from all His work that God created to do.

4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, on the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven.

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/18/opinion/trans-teen-suicide-judaism.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

ⁱⁱ <https://jwa.org/media/coming-of-lilith-by-judith-plaskow>