

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
A Poetic Voice
1st in the series “Beginnings”
Genesis 1:1-2:4a
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Beginnings are so important, aren't they? It's why we work hard to make a good first impression. And why the first date I took Jessi on was probably the most creative one we've ever had in the last 14.5 years.

The right beginning can set the stage for a lifetime... or even beyond. Just think of how many great first lines of a novel have out lived their author?

In fact, let's just try a few here. I'm going to give you the first line and try naming the novel. (Chuck and Terry, let everyone else have a chance before you give it away.)

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...” - Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” ~ Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice (1813)

“You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter.” -The Adventures of Huckelberry Fin

“There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”
—C. S. Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

This one some of you should know well:

“When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton.”

~ J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings (1954-1955)

That's just a few great first lines that peel open a whole world of creativity and imagination... and take us on sometimes beautiful, sometimes tragic, sometimes profound journeys. A good beginning peeks our curiosity, draws us in, and carries us down the rabbit hole. Beginnings are important.

So, that's where we're going to spend the next few weeks... in the first few chapters of the bible... “in the beginning...” because those pages are so full of profound beauty and meaning that it's past time we reclaim them from the abuse they've taken in the last century.

Every time they've been used to stir up trouble between religion and science, they have been diminished. Which means then, there's been an awful lot of diminishment for an awful long time.

The bible begins with a *profound poem*, not a dry textbook. And that's pretty significant. Our great narrative begins with poetry, which should tell us something.... something I think the Greeks understood. The Greek word for poet means **"to create."** So for the Greek mind, to be poetic is to be creative, and the very act of creation is poetic.

So, when we take the poetry of scripture, when we take the artistry and beauty and flatten it into prose... we diminish not just the text, but we start to diminish our very lives.

Bruggeman says that in by turning the poetry into prose, **"Life becomes so prosaic that there is a dread dullness that besets the human spirit. We become mindless conformists or angry protesters, and there is no health in us."**¹

Beginnings are so important. And the beginning of the bible is too good to miss. There is poetry here that can heal the soul and resurrect the spirit. In fact, in the last few years, Genesis 1 has become one of the most meaningful portions of scripture for me personally because I'm constantly hearing it echo through the rest of the pages of scripture.

But to really understand that, you have to know the story behind the poetry. It's the 6th Century BCE. For 18 months Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem. No one got in or out. There was food shortage...

and people began to starve...

until finally the walls of Jerusalem fell...

and the Babylonian army swept into Jerusalem... the way ancient armies did... burning, slaughtering, raping, pillaging...

Imagine ISIL sitting outside your walls for a year and a half, until you're children begin to starve to death. And then they come swarming in, and all hell breaks loose. That's the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem.

But not everyone is killed. Anyone deemed important... the leaders, the scribes, the politicians, the merchants, the artists... watch as their homes, their lives, their families are completely destroyed... and then they are carried off into exile.

They are prisoners of war in a foreign land.

Months go by... and despair sits in.

There is a numbness that grows in their hearts.

¹ Walter Bureggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 9.

They've lost everything they ever cared about... including their blessed assurance that Yahweh is mine... that God is in control and taking care of them.

The great Temple, the place of God's presence was plundered and destroyed and any faith in this God was wiped out with it. All that is left is a deep and profound void. An emptiness.

It's there, in the exile, that the inspired poet sits down and begins to write, **“When God began to create the heaven and the earth—the earth was a formless void... Darkness covered the face of the deep... and the Wind of God... the spirit of God, hovered over the waters...”**

This is how the poetry begins. And you can imagine the community of despair-filled-exiles gathered together reading this poetry for the first time... and they know... this poem is about them.

The earth was a formless void... an emptiness they know all to well.

Thick darkness covered the face of the deep... a darkness like pillars of black smoke burning... suffocating... isolating. A thick darkness covered the face of the deep sea... the place of chaos, swirling, churning, the waters of storms and death.

The world was a formless void, the poet writes.

Darkness covered the face of the deep sea...

It's a poem about the way things are. This is about the beginning, but it is also about them. They hear it read aloud and it reaches into their very lives

Just as it reaches into our lives... into your life.

Some of you know what it's like to look around and only see is the swirling waters of chaos, to look at your life and only see emptiness.

Or maybe not even to see that... because there is a deep darkness covering it all, so that you have no idea what ***is or isn't*** in front of you... and that's terrifying in itself

And yet the poet says this is the place where the wind of God, the spirit of God is hovering... and that this is the time, when God begins to create.

In other words, ***the dark swirling chaotic mess is the very substance from which God creates.*** Barbra Brown Taylor puts it this way, “New life **starts in the dark.** Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”²

It is into the dark chaotic mess that God begins to call out, piece be piece, new life and new beginnings.

² Barbra Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 129.

“Let there be light...”
“Let the waters of chaos separate, making sky and sea...”
“Let the waters of chaos be gathered to one place so that dry solid land may appear...”
“Let there be lights to govern and guide in both day and night... Sun and Moon and Stars...”
Again and again... “Let there be... Let there be... And there was... and God saw that it is good...”

There is this rhythmic beauty, like music pulsing through the poetry, pulsing through the chaotic mess... bringing order and life out of it. Out of the chaotic deep comes this invitation into a dance... where energy and life begin to flow.

Day after day, “Let there be...” until finally on the seventh day when God rested... and blessed the Sabbath.

This is the poetry of Creation.

The Rabbis say that the 7th day God didn’t rest because God was tired, but on the 7th day, God created *Menuha*, the word we translate as rest... It’s a day set aside for delight... of the soul and body.³

In other words, the poetry of Genesis 1 not only evokes delight with its rhythmic joy, it climaxes with God's work on the 7th day, creating this space for delight itself, the crown of creation.

All of this... God calls, and invites out of the dark formless void....

“Let there be...” God says.

It’s an invitation. Which is to say, this isn’t a coercive and controlling Creator. This is a God who invites new beauty and beginnings and goodness from the formless voids of our world.

The community in exile began reading this poetry again and again... they read it aloud when they gathered together. It became a liturgy for them. It becomes part of their worship, shaping their imaginations and their self-understandings.

The more they live with this poetry, the more they realized that this is what their ancient stories have always been telling them. This is what the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob has always done...

God spoke into the formless void of Sara’s womb, the painful barrenness and said, “Let there be new life...” And there was. And God saw that it was good.

³ <http://imagodeicommunity.ca/weekly-meditations/delighting-in-the-sabbath/> Physical comfort and delight are a big part of the experience of such restoration. As the ancient Midrash Tehillim counsels us, “Call the Sabbath a delight: a delight to the soul and a delight to the body.”

God spoke into the darkness of slavery in Egypt and said, **“Let there be light and freedom from captivity... And let the waters of the Red Sea be separated so that dry land may appear,”** And there was. And God saw that it was good.

Here at the beginning in Genesis 1 is the whole of biblical faith.
Wherever there is darkness,
 wherever there is formless void,
the spirit of God is there... And the word of God is beings spoken...

And one day the word becomes flesh and dwells among us... full of grace and truth, as the gospel of John puts it.
“And in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Again the poetry of creation.

This is the gospel of Jesus... the world of God...
And it is ***only the beginning.***

If we'll listen closely we'll hear the voice of God speaking still, **“Let there be...”**
inviting from the chaos of our lives,
 calling forth the fruits of Gods spirit out of it...
 calling forth love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gratefulness,
gentleness, and self control.... calling it, inviting it out of the chaos of your life.

The poetry of God is being spoken into your life. Art and creativity is being born there. Beauty is being created there in you.

So pay attention. Listen for what God is calling forth in your life.
You might just be surprised.
Look close enough and you too might just see what God sees there in you...
 “It is good. It is very good.”

Amen.

Reflection:

*New life starts in the dark.
Whether it is a seed in the ground,
a baby in the womb,
or Jesus in the tomb,
it starts in the dark.*

~ Barbara Brown Taylor

