

First Friends Church, a Quaker meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
Beginnings
Genesis 1:1-4, 6, 9, 11, 14-15, 20, 24, 26-31, 2:2-5

Reading

In the *beginning* when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.³ Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them.²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Message

I find that the stories we tell ourselves and each other are essential because they affect how we see the world, ourselves, each other and our faith. They tell us who we have been, and shape who we are now and who we are becoming.

I had a leading to focus on the earliest stories in the Hebrew Bible this summer- the ones we might not remember, or wonder about the lesson they teach. Which one comes to mind for you? For me: Noah's ark. The reason? In Sunday school we made an ark out of popsicle sticks because of a flood. That is what I learned - God's judgement and popsicle sticks. Oh and a rainbow. Now I wonder if it might be helpful for us to revisit, go deeper, or even rewrite these stories to apply to our daily lives.

Today's story is beginning; the beginning of the Bible and the beginning of creation. I know you have heard this story before, but I wonder what you noticed. Here is what I discovered. There were seven generations of amazing creation of the universe. Humans of both genders were made in the image of God. It took a whole day to make them, give instructions about caring for creation, and tell them they and the animals had plants to eat. There is blessing. It was all good. And God rests.

"But wait! There is something missing!" you might say. Where is the dirt? Where is the breath of God and Adam and his rib to make Eve, the serpent, trees, apple (it doesn't specify what kind of fruit by the way, nakedness, swords and angels, sin, punishment and banishment?" Well, that's another story.

We know the Greek Testament contains four Gospels by different authors who wrote stories for specific audiences. The Hebrew Testament also has four different authors/or groups of authors from four different traditions who told the stories from their perspectives. The difference is that later editors decided to weave the stories together rather than keeping them distinct. Just as we weave together two stories when we combine angels, shepherds, magi and mangers at Christmas.

The Bible is full of stories and it makes difference which story we tell. Growing up I thought the Bible contained all the Truth I needed to know about God. I also knew if I wanted to know something I should read a book. Books contained facts and truth. It came as a big shock for me to learn that books do not contain all the facts and books contradict each other. I conflated two ideas, just as some stories are conflated in the Bible or by the people who tell the Bible stories.

But the truth is biblical archeology shows many of the old stories are stories held in common with ancient civilizations much older than the Bible. Not just the flood story, but stories of kings, exile and return. The names, the places and even circumstances change, but the underlying story is recognizable. What does it mean to us if the ancient Hebrews "re-purposed" these stories?

Karl Jung found a phenomenon in cultures around the world—a circle symbol or mandala. It has the same basic elements and appears to be a fundamental expression of the human psyche¹—a yearning to know deeper meaning and mystery, to satisfy a soul need to explain that which cannot be explained and for which words are inadequate. This cosmic diagram reminds us all of our connection with the infinite.² The ancient stories that civilizations share do this too.

I was reminded of one of these stories when I began my job as the emergency manager for Orange County. A friend of mine presented a gift of perspective. It was a fossil of an extinct *Diplomytus* (fish) from the Eocene Age (56 to 33 million years ago) found in the Green River Formation of Wyoming. His note said, “One civilization’s disaster is another civilization’s creation myth.”

The stories we tell are essential because they affect what we believe about where we come from, who we are, and where we are going. They shape our faith and who we are becoming. Stories express our collective consciousness; the shared beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and knowledge that are common to our group or society. They inform our sense of belonging and identity, and our behavior. It is how unique individuals become communities.³ Lately my attention has been caught by the telling of stories I have never heard and new tellings of old stories.

For instance: The story of our country. The revolution at our beginning was a revolution, to demand rights. The story can overlook that it started with destruction of property to demand the attention of the powers to the injustice, instead of bloodshed (and not just tea thrown in a harbor.) It includes heroes who signed the Declaration of Independence and fought for the freedom to be a country, but only the heroes who were white men. And recently we were reminded 41 of these 56 freedom fighters owned human beings. Two were from Quaker families and one owned slaves.⁴ How do we tell this essential story?

The stories of our brothers and sisters: Recently I was talking with a white Friend who expressed what I felt. “Why did I not know about Tulsa until this week?” We might add to that the “Indian” boarding houses, the Red Summer of 1919, Rosewood, Florida 1923, Beaumont, Texas 1943, the Battle of Hayes Pond 1958, nationwide stories in 1968 following the assassination of MLK, Jr, or any of dozens of other racially motivated violent encounters between the founding of our country, the end of the civil war, and today.

It seems that only if you had access to a class in Black history or Chicano studies, or women’s studies, or Native American history in college or grew up in these minority communities would you have access to these essential stories. When we don’t know or forget history, we get to repeat the lesson in Los Angeles,

¹ <https://carljungdepthpsychologysite.blog/2020/01/08/carl-jung-on-mandalas/#.XvvZTG1Kjcc>

² <https://fractalenlightenment.com/14683/life/carl-jungs-psychological-diagnosis-using-mandalas>

³ <https://www.thoughtco.com/collective-consciousness-definition-3026118>

⁴ <http://www.mrheintz.com/how-many-signers-of-the-declaration-of-independence-owned-slaves.html>

Ferguson, Aurora, Minneapolis, Louisville, and Gallup. How do we hear these essential stories?

Another story I have been thinking about came from reading an analysis of “What will we see less of and more of in America’s churches in the 2020s?” These two lists came 100 days into the Covid pandemic when a “...fog has settled over us, obscuring our vision of both the present and future church.”⁵ I read the article. Frankly any of us could have written it. It told the story in a depressing and discouraging way and it had nothing do to with the pandemic. Smaller churches, less resources, less people in church in big worship on Sunday, more in small groups during the week, more part time clergy, clergy burn out... STOP!

Here is the same story told in different words in a poem by Keith Lewis.

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“I want to go to a dying church.

I want to sit in the pews of an aging congregation with wrinkled faces and wise hands.

I want my kids to have a couple friends and 36 new grandparents.

I want a retired school teacher to slip my boys a silver dollar when he comes down our aisle.

I want to go to a church that made hard choices and paid for it.

I want a church that will let me leave with dignity if I ever have to go, that doesn’t claim to be anything other than a small part of the body of Christ.

I want a church that split when they ordained women 35 years ago and split again when the pastor performed her first gay wedding.

I want to sit by parishioners who cried when their friends left for the thriving non-denominational worship center across town that puts bloody fetuses on billboards.

I want to go to a church that chose love, a church where the gay organist cried when his husband was ordained.

Where the congregants try to use the pronouns they/them/their for the 17 year old trans kid who comes alone but never sits alone.

I want a church that makes hard choices, that will ‘do what is right, let the consequence follow.’

Because that is exactly what Jesus did.

Jesus led a dying movement. His friends betrayed him. His father forsook him in the garden. And only a few women stood by his cross and cared for his body.

That’s what I want my boys to learn about God.

Even if Sunday school only has a couple other kids.”

⁵ <https://baptistnews.com/article/what-will-we-see-less-of-and-more-of-in-americas-churches-in-the-2020s/#.Xv-jA21Kjed>

Howard Thurman wrote: “Look well to the growing edge! All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge! It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and [people] have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. The birth of the child — life’s most dramatic answer to death — this is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge!”

It is essential that we carefully listen to the stories and the Truth we tell ourselves and each other because it affects what we see and shapes who we are becoming. In the scripture Michael read today there is no story of sin and separation that had to be broached by humans or by God. Life just is. Peace just is. We are created by and in the image of God by God and it is good.

We often tell the story that that there is fun and adventure in our meeting in the summer because we do special things. The longer hours of daylight can be a good reminder that we are immersed in the Light. This year is no different- although there are some fun and special things we cannot do this summer because of the pandemic and because we love each other- but many other fun and special things are coming. The essential story is we are always immersed in the Light and we are always doing special things.