

June 11, 2017  
Trinity Sunday

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant  
“Beginning with God”  
The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



*“Let mystery have its place in you; do not be always turning up your whole soil with the plowshare of self-examination, but leave a little fallow corner in your heart ready for any seed the winds may bring, and reserve a nook of shadow for the passing bird; keep a place in your heart for the unexpected guests, an altar for an unknown God.” ~ Henri-Frederic Ariel*

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## **Genesis 1:1-2:4**

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 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. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. 6 And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 7 So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. 8 God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. 9 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. 10 God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. 11 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. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. 14 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, 15 and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. 16 God made the two great lights — the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night — and the stars. 17 God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. 20 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." 21 So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. 24 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. 25 God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 26 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." 27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he 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." 29 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. 30 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. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2: 1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. 4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

### **John 1:1–3**

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*

*“Beginning with God”*  
*Genesis 1:1-2:4; John 1:1-3*

In 1891, a high school physical education teacher named James Naismith (who eventually became a Presbyterian minister) was trying to figure out what to do with a group of rowdy students trapped inside the school building during a particularly bad snow storm. In a moment of desperation – which probably drives a lot of great inventions – he nailed two peach baskets to opposite walls of the gym, divided the boys into two groups, and handed them a soccer ball. The goal of the game, he said, was to get the ball into the other team’s basket.

Since then, many new rules and regulations have developed to give the game of basketball structure, but one thing that has endured since the very beginning was the height of those baskets: ten feet from the floor. Naismith’s arbitrary decision ultimately had a huge impact on the game, since it meant the best players were likely to be the tallest. Eventually, these tall players figured out the art of the slam dunk, which quickly became a controversial shot. For a while, the slam dunk was forbidden in the NBA, but eventually it was balanced by the introduction of the three-point shot. The three-pointer was the great equalizer in basketball, since it got players away from the basket. It also meant that a player who was smaller in stature, like, for example, the Warrior’s Steph Curry, could score as many points as a big man like LeBron James, who can muscle his way to the basket or slam dunk a basketball with apparent ease.<sup>1</sup>

To understand the origin story – of a sport or a country or an organization – gives us insight far deeper than if we just looking at what is happening now, which is one reason it is important to read the first chapter of Genesis from time to time. It’s an easy text to dismiss; after all, most of us have been exposed to enough science that we could never believe the world was created in just seven days. So as modern listeners who encounter this text, we have to acknowledge what it is **not**. It is **not** science; it is not meant to be a factual, literal account of how the earth and everything in it came to be. It is also **not** myth; it is not simply a story in which we find certain enduring truths about creation and humanity and God’s relationship to it all.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/yin-yang-basketball/>

So: if it's not science and it's not myth, then what is it? Walter Brueggemann reminds us that this text, like all biblical texts, is **theology**; it teaches us about God. Rather than answering the question "*How did the world come to be?*" this text is seeking to answer the question, "*Who is God and how is God involved with the world and its creatures?*" Within this theological framework, says Brueggemann, the book of Genesis, and especially the account of creation, is **proclamation**.<sup>2</sup> This text proclaims a foundational theological truth: from the beginning of all that we know, behind and above and underneath and around all the world, God is.

Peace Child was a movement that grew out of the Cold War and its threat of nuclear annihilation. The name comes from the story of rival tribes in Papua New Guinea that would trade a child with each other as a way of stopping either tribe from attacking the other. This contemporary version of that story brought together American and Soviet teenagers to rehearse and perform an original musical about nuclear war. After performing in a production of Peace Child in my hometown in Virginia, I spent a month one summer in the Soviet Union, rehearsing and performing with peers from all over America and the USSR. As I reflect on this experience now, what strikes me is how much Peace Child played on people's *fears*. The musical was designed to raise the anxiety of the audience, to show that the threat of nuclear war was imminent and to prove that such a war could be the end of us all.

Although the book of Genesis tells the story of the beginning of the universe and God's relationship to humanity, it was of course, created and written in the context of a particular historical moment – a moment that felt like the **end** for God's people. Scholars believe this text was written down in the sixth century BCE, and that what prompted people to write it was the exile, when the Babylonians attacked and destroyed Jerusalem, killing many of the leaders along with the wealthy, most powerful citizens. Those who were left were deported to Babylon, to live in exile among their enemies. The exile threw everything the Israelites thought they knew about themselves and their God into question. It was in this time of tragedy and violence and despair and total uncertainty about the future that the book of Genesis was written. But notice: this is not a book that plays on people's fears.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation Commentary, John Knox Press, 1982.

Instead, the very first lines of Genesis proclaim that at the beginning of the creation of the universe and the world as we know it – **God is**. God exists when there is nothing but *chaos* and *emptiness*, when the earth is formless and void. And out of this nothingness, God creates...*everything*. It is when we are most filled with anxiety, most uncertain about our future, most unclear about who is in charge and what that means for us, our loved ones, our country, our world, that we need to hear the proclamation of Genesis 1. In the beginning, **God**...apart from God, **nothing**. Without this proclamation we cannot understand anything else in the Bible.

It was around the time I was involved in Peace Child that I started to have the only recurring dream I've had in my life. In this dream, I am driving in a car. Sometimes, I'm the driver and sometimes I'm the passenger. There are other passengers too; sometimes my parents and siblings, sometimes close friends, sometimes my husband and children. We are driving on a precarious and curvy coastal road, a road with incredible views of the valley or the ocean below. Then suddenly, inexplicably, the car *doesn't make the next turn*. We are still in the car but **there is no road beneath us**. We are flying – actually *falling* – through the air. In the dream I always know with great and dreadful certainty, that *this is the end*.

The worst part of the dream, of course, is when the car goes flying off the road, but strangely, that is also the best part, because as the car is suspended in the air with nothing underneath, I become crystal clear that **what really matters** is the people with me in the car and the love we share. Then, moments after this revelation, the car miraculously lands on a road, as smoothly as an airplane on a runway, and we keep going. *The car lands, and we keep going*.

God created the world and everything in it. God created human beings and called them into community. Underneath and all around the chaos and anxiety and uncertainty of our world – is God. As people of faith, this is **always** what we are called to proclaim, to ourselves, to one another, and to the world around us – even, and especially, when it feels like we and our country and world are hurtling through space with nothing beneath us, about to crash into oblivion. And lately, there is plenty going on in our nation and in our world to make us feel like we are about to go flying off the road at the next curve! In the face of our fear and anxiety and uncertainty, Genesis 1 reminds us that this is



God's world and we are God's children. That is the **primary** proclamation of this text. The *other* proclamation is this: God always works in and through **community**.

Genesis teaches us that God, whom we know and call One, is also, mysteriously and somewhat inexplicably, a community. "Let **us** make humankind in **our** image," God says, and goes on to create two human beings, male and female. Then there is the beginning of the gospel of John, where we learn that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Jesus, the Word, was present with God from the very beginning. And if that's not enough, think about what science teaches us about the nature of God's creation. From the smallest particle to the largest organism, the natural world is composed of communities: quarks, protons, neutrons, and electrons. Atoms and molecules, organelles and cells. Organisms, which make up biospheres. Planets and solar systems. Our entire God-given creation is made up of communities.<sup>3</sup> So for us to be made in the image of God means that *we are created for **relationships**. We are created for **community**.*

The game of basketball took off when it made room **both** for the players who excelled at getting to the basket *and* the players who could shoot from behind the arc. *Peace Child's* biggest accomplishment was not stopping the Cold War but bringing together children from enemy nations and engaging them in a common cause. As we navigate the anxieties and the uncertainties of our time, we can strengthen our community, the community of this family of faith, by making room for God and for one another.

What might happen if you reached out to a few people who are in this sanctuary today and invite them over for dinner or out for coffee? It could be people you know or people you don't, or maybe some combination of the two. What if you got together and talked about Genesis chapter one? About what it means to you and how you understand it and what about it makes no sense or makes you angry. Maybe from there you'll move onto other topics. To be in community together means to engage one another on the most personal and difficult and challenging elements of our faith. When we do, then person by person, conversation by conversation, we not only create and strengthen our community, we become a reflection of God's very being.

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<sup>3</sup> Harder, Cameron (2013-05-06). *Discovering the Other: Asset-Based Approaches for Building Community Together* (Kindle Locations 246-248). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Kindle Edition.

In the face of fear, anxiety, and loss, our forefathers and foremothers wrote down this text to remind all who read it that *God is the author of all things*. Because of that, we have **nothing** to fear. We have been created in God's image to be in relationships and create communities. May God give us the courage to do just that, and to make our community one that embraces difference, manifests love, and always *always*, proclaim the hope that comes when we begin with God.

Amen.