

## IN THE BEGINNING, GOD

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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Psalm 8  
Genesis 1:1-5

Humans do something that no other creature would dare attempt. We try to make sense of life.

One of our favorite questions is why? Why are we here? Why do terrible things happen? Why do wonderful things happen? We are certainly not without freedom and the ability to shape our lives, but no one *achieves* the best things like love or family, beauty or worship, gifts or mission.

Anyone who is paying attention to life knows that these best things in life are not earned. Neither are the worst things deserved. The recent murder of George Floyd has rightfully focused the country's attention on the senseless brutality which all too frequently attends the policing of our sister and brothers of color. No parent or child or spouse ever deserves to lose a loved one that way. How do you make sense of such a tragedy? It is as hard as making sense of the blessings of life.

How do you even make sense of how your life is turning out? Are any of us actually living the lives we had dreamed about in high school? No, life takes some pretty funny turns. But there is something planted in the human soul that cannot accept the nihilistic explanation that life just happens. We press to understand the drama. We want to know why the world is the way it is, and we want to understand the even more perplexing riddle of our own lives.

So we come to church, and either consciously or subconsciously we drag these questions with us into worship. We place our lives before the biblical drama, join Job in daring to stare at the sacred whirlwind, and we ask our question "Why?" We hope not for a better life, but at least to gain sacred perspective on the life we have.

Well, can you imagine arriving at a play in the second act, or showing up for a movie an hour late, or starting a mystery novel in the middle of the book? Of course not. You'll never understand the drama without attending to the beginning of the story. That is why Genesis is so important to our most existential questions.

The biblical drama, the drama the Holy Spirit has written about your life, starts with the words "In the beginning, God." It starts not with what you did, or did not do. Your life's story starts not with your graduation, your wedding, your promotion, or your last purchase. Neither does it start with your disease, grief, or your many losses. Your life, all life, begins with God. You will never understand a thing about life until you are clear about this beginning.

"In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the *Ruach* (the

wind, the Spirit) of God swept over the face of the waters. And God said let there be, and there was... and God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good.”

Before creation, there was nothing for us. There was just a dark void. All that exists derives life from God and apart from God all things return to nothing. That means that if you try to make a created thing, like your job or loved one, the end or goal of life, you will soon find that you are holding nothing. Because these things find their meaning only in their created origin. When we say in the creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth” we are claiming that all of life is derived, we are claiming that we are not our own, and we are claiming that the whole earth was given for communion with God. That is why we dare not divide the world between sacred and secular or spiritual and material. It is all God’s. It is all sacred and spiritual by virtue of its ultimate origins.

The biblical narrative, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by ancient people, has no interest in depicting how or when God created all things. Genesis was never meant to be a science book. It is too powerful for that. It speaks to us in verses of eternal poetry that were written not just for the head, but for the soul that longs to know itself and cannot apart from its Creator.

How does this sacred sonnet help us to understand life? Notice that God alone utters the holy word *Barah* which means “Let there be.”<sup>1</sup> That word is never placed in human mouths anywhere in the biblical narrative. You are not the Creator. You are not the creator even of your own life. You are a creature, who lives among other creatures God has already called good. But with our hearts filled with anxiety that life just isn’t good enough we are tempted to utter the forbidden word *Barah*. “Let there be a life according to my own plans, a life without pain or loss, a life that unfolds by my schedule, a life that rewards for effort.”

From the beginning, life has never been an achievement. It isn’t something that you get right or wrong. I know this drives some of us crazy, but there is no way you can get an A on life. It is only a created grace that can be received. The same Spirit that once moved across the face of the deep, shoving aside the darkness and chaos, is still at work in your life creating light and beauty out of every chaotic experience.

“God said, ‘Let there be light’ and the light pushed back the darkness. And the light God called day, and the darkness [God] called night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” Can you see the daily cycle of creativity here? God will not allow the darkness to rule the earth. Day after day, often in ways too subtle for human eyes to notice, God is still piercing the darkness of our lives with light and beauty. You were alone, but a new relationship is discovered. You had a disease, but it goes into remission. You were worried about your kid, but now he seems to be doing okay. You were unemployed, but the new job appears to be working out just fine. There was darkness, but it was pushed aside by a new day of hope. Maybe you would even say that if you had not passed through the dark night you would never have come to the new day which you are now enjoying. You’ve experienced more of God’s ongoing creativity. Give thanks.

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, *bara*’ is a verb, meaning “to create,” the subject of which can only be God.

By now, however, you know that eventually the night will come again. God did not permanently extinguish the darkness. The new relationship will also end. Everybody dies. If one disease doesn't get you, another eventually will. The dark night just keeps returning. Apparently, life has been designed that way from the beginning. Night-Morning-Night-Morning. Loss-Hope-Loss- Hope. The rhythm just continues as it has from the beginning.

Now if that is good enough for you, then you don't need to be a Christian. If life is just a succession of good and bad experiences, religion is pointless. There has to be more. The blessing is that the Creator thinks so as well.

Eventually, God could not stand to see us living with so much darkness, especially the darkness of our own making. So God provided a light that could not be extinguished no matter how dark life becomes. The biblical drama continues with the Gospel of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God. 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."

From the beginning it has been God's design to give us more than the succession of day and night, moments of happiness that slip away in the shadows of adversity. Because from the beginning God has loved God's creatures. Remember the whole purpose of creation was for our communion with God. So in Jesus Christ, the holy word *Barah* is made flesh. The Creator became creature and entered the darkness. In Christ, God says "Let there be" communion even in the darkness. Again, as long as there is communion with the Creator there is life and even beauty. And when there is no communion, life is just nothing. Do you see? The light of hope comes not from the next thing, but from the God who is with you through everything.

You receive this communion with God simply by receiving the love which brought Christ here. There it is again: receiving. Perhaps this is the hardest thing for human creatures to do. And this is why we worship — to learn how to receive. How do you love God? How do you fall in love with anyone? It is never an achievement. It is sheer grace which can only be received.

This life can be so hard at times. Late at night we face our fears about our marriages, our children, our health. In the news we face the ongoing crisis of Covid-19 and the sputtering economy and more injustice than we can comprehend. Do you think it is enough to come to church and hear "Don't worry the sun will come up tomorrow?" No, there is nothing Christian about that. Our hope is that in Christ, the Creator has entered every dark corner of life, looking for us. God is looking for the homeless mother who has lost her way, for the angry teenager who is in danger not just of dropping out of school but out of life itself, for the busy executive who's working too hard to notice that she is all alone, and for every alienated person of color in this country whose full humanity has been denied by a culture that still needs to be reminded that black lives matter.

In Jesus Christ, the Creator has come looking for you. The only question is will you receive God's love, and find the light that can bring you all the way home?

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.