



First Congregational United Church of Christ

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First Sunday of Epiphany

January 9, 2022

Due to the current high number of covid cases in Black Hawk County, we are recommending that folks join worship by viewing it on our Facebook page at 10:30 a.m. The service will also be available for viewing after the service. We hope to resume in-person worship soon.

We are delighted that you joined us today! We hope you will find us an affirming, uplifting, and committed family of faith. Here we work to make everyone, without any exceptions, to feel accepted, inspired, and encouraged in their spiritual journey. In dialogue, we seek to understand. In encouragement, we seek to heal. In all things we yearn to live by love, for peace, with joy. This is a place where your intellect will be challenged, your heart will be nurtured, and your spirit refreshed. Varying beliefs are expressed openly and freely, and your doubts will not be suppressed. We trust that we are all, every person and part of creation, continuing to be blessed by God's grace; and that in community we can help each other to see this grace alive in our lives and relationships. We hope to share our gifts with you, even as we pray that you will want to share your gifts with us. Whoever you are and wherever you may be in your life's journey, we invite you to be a part of our lives and our spiritual home. Welcome!

POINTS TO PONDER

“¹ In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the 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.”

– *Genesis 1.1*

“Myths are created to help us to make sense of our reality when facts are not available. They help to give us meaning to our lives, and to hopefully also grant us a worldview so as to establish a cognitive foundation by which we may build sense of purpose for our lives. The ancient Hebrews were not trying to tell us that this story of creation was how things actually happened. Only God knows that, they believed; but rather to give us a

framework to order our thoughts about the things we couldn't know with certainty so that we might find some direction for our lives amidst all of its uncertainty and mystery.

Here, the Hebrews put God at the start of all reality. God was, they believed, even before there was substance and matter. God created substance and matter, the heavens and earth. And because they believed God was just and good, this lent itself to their understanding that creation itself, and all that is created, is good. It is an emanation of God, such that whatever God created carried with it the very characteristics of God.

This understanding fomented an optimistic view of life. Yet, the Hebrews were well aware that not all reality is positive, much less optimistic. They understood that so much of life is beyond our control, and that we cannot manipulate it as we'd wish. But such a view would lead to chaos, and not order; and so by having God create all reality as we know it, it could be claimed that there was an order to it all amidst our perception of it being chaos.

In saying that 'the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,' this made sense to how we are given a tabula rasa at our birth and that it is up to us to mold and shape our lives into something that has meaning and purpose. If God created order from chaos, structure to a formless void, and light out of darkness, then they reasoned that we, being made in the image of God, could do the same for our lives.

In other words, life doesn't just happen to us, but we actually participate in the creation of what we experience. Just as the wind/breath/spirit of God 'swept over the face of the waters,' waters often seen as unmanageable and uncontrollable, we too could breathe our spirit on the reality before us so as to create a way of perceiving and envisioning it. Our own spirit impacts our relationships with our world and the reality we come to understand through the lenses of not only our experiences, but our imaginations. We shape our own reality by our creativity, in work, play, and by how we interact with others and the rest of creation. Like God, we can blow our spirit onto our experiences so as to give them structure, meaning, and purpose. And in doing so, we help make what is chaotic, ordered...what is a void, structured...what is seems impersonal as personal...and what appears meaningless and purposeless as reshaped with significance and fulfillment.

When we come to understand that our spiritual ancestors were trying to create a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, and not a historical and scientific documentation of how things started, we see that we have much to learn from them – especially as we understand the yearning of their hearts, minds, and souls for something that would create for them a reason for living and being.

What are the stories we create to help us to find significance and fulfillment in this life? What helps us to keep going and to stay motivated? How do we see our lives as connected to our mythology about life and why we are here? How can we help others to make sense of what we can never know for sure? How can we help create our own realities and those of others by the use of our spirit? When confronted with the 'formless void' of existence, and the darkness that covers the deep of our unknowing, is there light that we can shed for ourselves and others along this life journey?"

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/5/2021*

“³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”

— *Genesis 1.3*

“The Hebrews used highly metaphorical language to suggest the reality of their perceptions. The light from God refers not only to the light of the sun, moon, and stars that defined day and night, but also the light of truth, insight, inspiration, creativity, and blessing. In all of our lives, we can reside in the darkness of what is primordially given to us, or we can shine light on existence itself by conjuring up images that help us to gain meaning and purpose in our lives and see how we fit into our wider world.

Just as God created light with words, so too can we use our words, our actions, our attitudes, and our very being to create light in our world. We see that light did not exist independently of God in the Hebrew mythology, but rather was projected by God upon the world of substance. Whatever we receive physically in life, it is up to us to shine our apperceptions onto that reality to create something new – something illuminating.

Light becomes presence in our lives when we project the goodness within us onto our reality. The void of existent matter need not be the summation of our lives; but rather the light of love, blessing, generosity, kindness, gentleness, peaceableness, and justice that we bestow and work for each and every day of our lives. Darkness is not to be our condition, for we are bearers and projectors of light into our world. Wherever we go, we, like God, can be producers of the light that is within us; shining our radiance on to all whom we meet, and all that we experience.”

– *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/5/2021*

“⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”

– *Genesis 1.4*

“Light was the first thing God created. Light connoted goodness, blessing, wonder, beauty, wisdom, and pretty much all that we interpret as positive in our lives. Light was a moral concept, as well as an aesthetic, and pragmatic one. Where light is present, everything becomes illuminated. We see it more clearly, and in all of its resplendent colorations.

Light, as a moral concept, being the first thing made means that everything that is created afterwards is not only done with good intentions and motives, but actually possesses that light of goodness within us. God grants us the light, and we are to receive and project that light ourselves, being made in God’s image.

Morality, as light, was created first – so that all things could thereafter be seen in relation to the light...to what is moral. This framework was integral to the Hebrew understanding of life. Life, without morality, was meaningless and purposeless. We need the light of morality to shine on our lives to make sense not so much of how are now, but how they can and should be in the future.

Since light is created first, it is to imbue all things thereafter created with light. We are to be the bearers of the light within us, and the projectors of light onto all that we experience. Light, morality, is our inner core. And when we can see and nurture that light within us, then we can shine our light on the lives of others. We are to, in all things, act with the light of morality – not content to being formless voids of self-centeredness, but rather God-shaped creatures of goodness. We, like God, are to separate the light from the darkness in our lives. We are to let our lights shine.”

– *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/5/2021*

“⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”

– *Genesis 1.5*

“To the ancient mind, to name something is to have power over it. It is God, not humans, who name the light ‘Day’ and the darkness ‘Night’ – implying that it is God alone, not humans, who have control over these dimensions of reality.

We will later notice that humans name all the animals, and even Adam names Eve, denoting that humans are the stewards and caretakers of all life on earth, and that supposedly men are to be the decision-makers in human relationships rather than women, as was thought to be the case in that patriarchal culture.

But only God has power over night and day. Humans do not make the sun rise or set, nor the moon and the stars. God was thought to do these things. Night, in an age long before electricity, was a scarier time – a time

when predators were on the prowl and the lack of vision and light could lead to all sorts of frightening and harmful events. Even in the daytime, the wind, thunder, and lightning of storms was fearsome, and to be on the waters could be hazardous when the waves grew taller.

But the Hebrew belief that God was in control of night and day, because God named them and didn't just create them, was a comfort to a people who had a need to feel that a benevolent force was in charge of the elements of nature they could not control. Horses could be tamed, lions could be caged, but humans could not quiet the winds and waves, or harness the lightning and thunder. A God who would look after their safety and protection in the midst of threatening world was important for ancient people; and still is today for many.

Since all was darkness before God created light, evening was thought to precede the day in Hebrew thinking. This, by the way, is why their Sabbath starts at sunset and ends at sunset the next day."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/5/2021

CALLED TOGETHER AS SPIRITUAL FAMILY

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Anne Hoekstra

Affirming God's Presence in Us All

Welcoming the Light of Love in Our Midst

Anne Hoekstra

We prepare ourselves for communing with the sacred as love's light is brought into our awareness. The light of love burns within and among each of us, and we carry that light into our sanctuary; visually reminding us of the image of the divine that lives in our hearts, minds, and souls – and that we nourish through our faith-filled fellowship.

***Centering Our Souls**

Anne Hoekstra

"O Sun behind all suns

I give you greeting this new day.

Let all Creation praise you

Let the daylight and the shadows praise you

Let the fertile earth and the swelling sea praise you

Let the winds and the rain, the lightning, and the thunder praise you

Let all the breathes--all that is living, praise you.

O God of all Life, I give you greeting this day."

(Adapted from Celtic Prayers of Iona by J. Philip Newell)

WE LISTEN FOR THE SACRED IN THE MIDST OF OUR LIVES

***Hymn for Spiritual Strength**

"How Firm a Foundation"

NCH #407

A Time for All God's Children

Abbie Chronister

Prayers

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns, and Acts of Compassion or Kindness

Silent Meditation: The Prayers of the People

Pastoral Prayer

Unison Prayer: "Poetic Prayer in the Spirit of Christ"

Anne Hoekstra

Loving Spirit, who is here and there,
we're grateful for your tender care.
Your virtues rise, your values prized;
near and far, and everywhere.
Feed our bodies, and feed our souls.
And by forgiveness make us whole.
And may we all evils deplore,
as we search and sail for mercy's shore.
May peace and love within us rule,
and justice be your Spirit's tool;
Now and always, for us and others,
and for all creation.
May we make it so, all as one,
by your inspiration.

Scripture Lesson

Genesis 1:1-5

Anne Hoekstra

^{1,1}In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the 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.
³Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Message

"The Light of Creative Imagination"

***Hymn for Light Shining in Darkness**

"Transcendent, Ineffable, Great Mystery"

Tune: St. Denio

Music: Adapt. from a Welsh ballad; Words: Rev. Bret Stuart Myers, 7/21/2010

Transcendent, ineffable, great mystery
No words can describe your whole meaning to me.
You're real without being, beyond all compare;
Your presence I feel it whenever I care.

Creative, instructive, example to all
I pray without seeing, though hear your faint call.
Forgiving and healing with kindness sublime,
A love never-ending, yet still beyond time.

You're mythic, poetic, you're truth beyond facts
Creation reveals you when we are relaxed.
No science can prove you, no logic discern
The mind is unable, but spirit does burn.

We sometimes will pray as though you are like us.
We know that you are not, but we still make a fuss.
We ask you for things as though you'll intercede
Yet it's our own actions by which we are freed.

When we love a neighbor as we love ourselves
Your power lives in us, your grace in us dwells.
We give you the thanks for the blessings we find
When virtue meets practice then with you we've dined.

With justice, compassion, and faith beyond sight
Christ strove to bring beauty to each day and night.
Restoring, imploring, with peace as our goal
We go to do likewise, let joy fill our soul.

WE DEDICATE OURSELVES TO GOD'S SERVICE THROUGH FAITHFULNESS

Giving of Our Tithes and Offerings

Special Music

"Each Winter as the Year Grows Older"

by William Gay and Annabeth McClellan

John Mardis, Soloist
Greg Hoekstra, Trumpet

****Unison Prayer of Dedication***

Anne Hoekstra

In the beginning O God
You shaped our souls and set its weave
You formed our bodies and gave us breath.
Renew us this day in the image of your love.
O great God, grant us your light
O great God, grant us your grace
O great God, grant us your joy this day
And let us be made pure in the well of your health.
(Adapted from Celtic Prayers of Iona by J. Philip Newell)

***Encouragement for the Journey**

Today, Christ's light shines on and through you. You are the light of the lives around you. When you shine with loving-kindness, the outcast will see. When you careen with compassion, the oppressed will take notice. When you radiate peace and goodwill, all the world will see you as a friend. Let your light of love beam forth that you may encourage even more than you are encouraged. May your lantern, filled with the oil of goodness, bear blessings for all you meet on your life's path. In the name of the one whose life is light. May it be so.

Postlude

Get In Touch with Us!

Questions?

**Call 319-234-8927 or email us at
fcuccoffice@gmail.com**

(Messages will be checked periodically)

Pastor Bret Myers: revbmyers@yahoo.com

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*Please make an appointment with Rev. Myers if you would like to meet with the pastor.
You may email him at revbmyers@yahoo.com, or call/text his cell at 608-370-9472.
Video talking is also available via Skype or Zoom.*

Nourishment for the Journey

It is error to read the creation mythology in Genesis as a scientific account of how things came to be. This should be obvious since the myth was created many millennia before science was established. However, it bears reiterating to bring to our consciousness, for our own worldview defaults to a scientific understanding unless we intentionally put on a mythological lens to shed for us a different light.

In reading the first chapter of Genesis, our minds may inquire how we may make sense of the text in accordance with our current scientific understandings. What was the “formless void” and the “deep?” Water? Space? Was light (created on day 1 according to the text) created before the sun, the moon, and the stars (which later are said to be created on day 4)? If so, how? Perhaps bioluminescence, as is found in fireflies and some sea creatures? The collision of matter with anti-matter?

Such questions obscure the meaning of the text. It is not a scientific, or even historical, account of creation, but rather a mythology designed to give us understanding about a world filled with competing realities: light vs darkness, good vs evil, truth vs falsehood, etc.

It is perhaps intentionally unclear whether God created the formless void and darkness or even the matter (and anti-matter) by which the earth and the heavens are composed, or whether matter/anti-matter pre-existed and God formed the universe from them.

Of course, some theologians and philosophers think that it is absurd to speak of God as a “being” with a will, powers to create, etc., since God is ineffable and indescribable. We imbue God with human, albeit superhuman, characteristics because speaking of God as an ethereal other, force of nature, or concept that is both non-existent spatially and temporally and yet “real” to us consciously is linguistically a difficult task. Even if we don’t use the word, “God,” we are still left with a dilemma of how to make sense of that which is beyond us.

Science cannot explain everything. It is not the new God as some Enlightenment thinkers had hoped for. We have seen the limits of science, and also the numerous ways it can be used maliciously. In any case, we are forced to speak of what we don’t really know in terms of that in which we do – creating reality that we do not know, but only theorize, to be true. We may create theories and concepts for describing what we don’t know, but the language, we realize, is imprecise and only an approximation of truth.

We need some point of reference, something that corresponds to reality as we know it. Yet, we also know there is reality beyond what we can know. It ironically seems that we are coming to an understanding that the ancients had so long ago: we are sometimes required to speak mytho-poetically and mythologically. Where truth and reality is unclear, we must speak with words that suggest rather than describe what is truth and reality. And if we are to do this with integrity, we must be clear that this is what we are doing.

The authors of the Hebrew Creation story had borrowed from cultures before them. Yet they comprised a unique story of the beginnings of reality that complied with their own understandings of a theistic God who was the Creator of all – or at least the shaper of that which was originally formless.

Their dualistic worldview was derived from their experiences. They knew there was day and night. They associated the former with light and the latter with darkness, not just physically and cosmologically, but also morally and spiritually. Thus, before the heavens and earth were created, they conceived of this as a period of darkness – not just perceptually, but axiologically. Only by the hand, breath, spirit, or word of God was light created. God is associated with light – that which is good, as the text so succinctly describes. That which is darkness is devoid of God, devoid of goodness. God’s Spirit may brood or sweep over the darkness and expose and illuminate that which is in the darkness, but the darkness is a symbol of that which is not-God.

Contextualizing the story anthropomorphically may create some distance in our experience of the reality attested to in the text, but it also keeps us from literalizing and thinking blasphemously about that which was never designed to give us facts but rather was to aid in our understanding.

There is much we can learn from the ancient texts, not simply how they perceived things, but how their quest for wisdom can aid our own. Their myths help us to recognize our own. What seems archaic and unscientific to us reminds us that we have on our own blinders. We don't often think we allow ourselves to think mytho-poetically, except at the movies or when reading fiction. But perhaps they have something to teach us.

We may think it quaint that the ancient Hebrews "believed" that God could simply say, "Let there be light," and light was created. Yet it is not too far removed from our own belief that we are, to a large extent some would say, shapers of our own reality. Creation ex nihilo, as attributed to God's creative activity in forming the universe, may seem simplistic; but we often hold on to the same doctrine as applied to our own well-being or what we become by our thoughts, attitudes, and actions.

One of our own postmodern myths is that we can create our own reality. As with any myth, there is some truth to it. But we also have to recognize it as an approximation of truth rather than the whole truth. Our medical experiments with biofeedback reveal that our minds can indeed affect our health and outcomes with disease. New age gurus tell us we can create our own reality, and that if we can think it and dream it, we can be it. Yes, there is some truth to that. Of course, such philosophy is, like science, limited and should only be taken so far. Mind over matter works to a degree, but matter can also affect mind! The sweat-lodge deaths and near-deaths of the followers of one such new age guru in Arizona over a year ago prove the point. Extreme heat can overpower both mind and body!

Yes, we can reduce some negativity by thinking positive thoughts, and we can alleviate some pain by using biofeedback. But despair or clinical depression can be more than a purely mental phenomenon, and there are some pains so intense that we can't think at all – otherwise enough to focus on manipulating our pain or creating positive thoughts and feelings. We can find humor in some situations that are not dire, but the Holocaust and other acts of genocide and torture are obviously no laughing matter regardless of how we look at them. Myth reminds us that the most fervently held truths only apply so far.

Perhaps we need to give more heed to mytho-poetic and mythological thinking. We discount it in other cultures and other eras, but we often fail to see our own mythologies that we take for certainty. Certainties and facts, the ancients realized, could not provide one's life with meaning and purpose. It took mythical and mytho-poetic thinking to do that. We cannot decipher truth from facts, nor meaning from evidence. Purpose is not something we can test for, but something we must imaginatively create out of the mystery of our inner being. Myth is the way we do that – the only way we can do that.

Perhaps when seen from this context, the first creation was not light after all. Perhaps it was myth. Myth is the power of words to understand our reality. And with understanding came the power to shape or even create our reality. The myth created the light. Mytho-poetically understood, of course.

--- Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/6/2012