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# Trinity Sunday

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In the mid-1990s, sociologist and civil rights champion, James Loewen, published what would become, by far, his most famous book. Selling over 2 million copies and winning an American Book Award, the book attracted enormous attention—both praise and derision—stemming in part from its rather provocative title, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. A groundbreaking work, which fascinated many and infuriated some, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* critically analyzed twelve leading American history textbooks, showing how their so-called “objective” presentations of American history actually depicted the past in a manner rife with racism, sexism, xenophobia, and sometimes outright lies: that is to say, in a manner serving certain dominant interests at the expense of historically silenced voices.

I mention Loewen’s book because whenever I hear Genesis 1 I enter a little reverie in which I imagine myself, inspired by Loewen’s contrariness, writing a similar kind of book, not exactly *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, but more specifically, “Pious Fictions My Sunday School Teacher Told Me.” And chapter 1, page 1 of that imaginary book would be all about Creation: specifically, the lesson from day 1 of Sunday School that, based on the first chapter of Genesis, “in the beginning, God created everything out of nothing”; that first there was nothing, and then God spoke some words, and over the course of six days suddenly there was everything. “Creation from nothing”: a doctrine so embedded in Judeo-Christian theology that it even has its own special Latin phrase: “*creatio ex nihilo*,” creation out of nothing.

Now, this teaching may well be true, and I am not arguing that God did not come before everything, but just that such a teaching cannot be based (as it usually is) on the reading we just heard from Genesis—because, the second verse of the entire Bible, Genesis 1:2, states that a wind, or spirit, from God “swept over the face of the waters.” Now if, according to the way this passage is usually read, there was nothing before God started making stuff, then where did the waters come from? How can there be waters before God begins to create? before God ever utters a word?

This is a case where attention to the details of how the Bible got written—who/what/when/where/why was this story of Creation composed—becomes helpful and important for understanding the content of the story: for understanding how there can be water if God hasn’t made anything yet.

Two really important pieces of context here: 1) when and by whom is this story being written down, and 2) what does water (or more specifically, “the waters”) represent for the people who authored this Creation account.

[And before we briefly take up these two critical questions, let me pause for a really quick advertisement: the kind of contextual analysis that we’re about to succinctly explore is the type of thing that we have been doing all year long in St Anne’s in-depth study of the Hebrew Bible (called EfM: Education for Ministry), a 7-month deep dive into the historical and cultural background of the Hebrew Bible, a course that I’m happy to offer again starting in the fall if there’s sufficient interest. So, please keep it in mind.]

And now back to the meat of today’s message: First, when and by whom is this story being written down?: Most scholars agree that this first chapter of Genesis was likely edited into its present form during and slightly after the most traumatic period in the history of ancient Israel, a 50-year period of forced exile in the empire of Babylon. Without going into all of the historical minutiae, the fundamental point is that the rise of the Babylonian Empire in about 600 BCE constituted an existential threat to the people of Israel. This threat subsequently exploded into nothing short of an absolute national disaster when the Babylonians conquered Israel’s land, burned God’s Temple in Jerusalem, and then forcibly exiled Israel’s inhabitants—men, women, and children—to the cities of the Empire. So it was as a community of marginalized aliens, vulnerable foreigners in a strange land, that Israel’s leaders decided to write down their stories about God’s Creation.

Second, what did water, or more specifically “the waters” (as it says in Genesis 1:2), mean to Israel at this time? We typically have pretty positive associations with water: essential for life, nourishes us on a hot day, beautiful rivers all around us where we can fish, swim, and kayak. Now, before I go on let me pause and acknowledge that there are some in this church—and I’m thinking especially of our recent wardens (Tom, Anne, Carol?)—for whom water may not exactly conjure up the best memories, especially in the context of this church, given St Anne’s recent flood-prone history. But generally speaking, we typically have pretty positive associations with water. The ancient Israelites, however, were much closer to our water-weary wardens: for the people of ancient Israel, water was not simply considered a good

thing. For the Israelites, living in the ancient Near East, along the shores of the Mediterranean, “the waters” commonly conjured up danger, threat, risk, chaos: “the waters” of the Great Sea were understood as that chaotic region where sailors risked their lives and often did not make it back alive. While water was certainly regarded as nourishing and essential, “the waters”—the phrase we have here in Genesis—was the site of unpredictability, danger, and even death.

In these opening verses of Genesis, however, what happens to these waters? From the very beginning the authors honestly acknowledge that yes, “the waters,” the symbol of chaos and danger are simply present in the world; before God starts creating anything, “the waters” of unpredictability and threat are real dangers, and there’s no getting around this: danger and death are simply a part of life. But in the verses that follow, we see God putting boundaries on these waters, organizing and limiting the chaos. God fixes the turbulent waters into specific locations; they can’t just run wild anymore. God tells the crazed waters “here are your boundaries; here there will be land.” God, in other words, creates order in the midst of chaos; God establishes reliably firm ground where before there were only turbulent seas. As the Jewish Study Bible’s commentary on Genesis 1:2 states: “To modern people, the opposite of the created order is ‘nothing,’ a vacuum. [But] to the ancients, the opposite of the created order was something much worse than ‘nothing.’ It was an active, malevolent force we can best term ‘chaos.’ In this verse, chaos is envisioned as a dark, undifferentiated mass of water...To say that [God] had subdued chaos is to give [God] highest praise.”

And so by acknowledging the waters of chaos that precede Creation and then presenting day-by-day God’s process of subduing and ordering them, what are our ancient Israelite authors saying? On the one hand, they are very honestly recognizing that life comes with its inherent dangers, threats, and turbulence. But then, in the next breath, they say, “yes, but amidst the chaos, God brings order, reliability, firm land to stand on amidst the churning seas.” And remember that the people writing this are facing their own existential chaos, danger, and even death: in exile in a foreign Empire, far from home, with a steely gaze they simultaneously acknowledge that life is full of its overwhelming waters, its chaos and its threats, and at the same time, there is a God who brings order to the chaos, who creates

firm ground amidst roiling waves.

Perhaps you and I are not exactly exiles in a foreign Empire; perhaps you and I are actually the beneficiaries of our domestic Empire, the American Empire, from which we—often unjustly—benefit tremendously. But that is not to say our lives lack acquaintance with chaos: we too know “the waters” of threat and danger; as the authors of Genesis plainly acknowledge, it is practically impossible to live a full human life and not, sooner or later, be forced to acknowledge that we are really not in control: those chaotic waters of mental illness, or addiction, or family dysfunction, or climate change, or ... [fill in the blank] ..., such chaotic waters sooner or later rock all of our boats. But it’s in the midst of those crazed waters, as Genesis 1:2 plainly states, that God’s Spirit, or “wind,” comes blowing: the Spirit blows across the waters as God goes to work, ordering the terrible seas, bounding them, calming down the chaos.

Faced with dangers and threats we can’t begin to imagine, Genesis’ ancient Jewish authors, exiles in a foreign land, have much to teach us today, not only about the God who creates the world, but also the God who calms the chaos: so, where are “the waters” churning in your life, your family, our society, this morning? Where do things feel threatening, dangerous, perhaps even chaotic and out of control? While the authors of Genesis do not dismiss that these troubling experiences are part and parcel of human life—that chaos is on the scene of existence before God even speaks a word—those writers also remind us that there is a God who comes to bring order and calm to the churning waves. This is the God who comes alongside exiles in a foreign Empire and reassures them that they’ll make it home. This is the God who comes alongside you and me when our boats are rocking out-of-control, who speaks a word of comfort and calm, suddenly stilling our stormy seas.

Where in your life this morning do you need this God of “the waters” to speak? Where could you use the Spirit, the wind, of God to blow, bringing order and calm? I encourage each of us to deliberately invite God’s Spirit to come this morning: to ask God directly to speak a word into our lives; and then I invite us to wait, listen, watch for the waters—perhaps ever so slowly and unexpectedly—to subside, and for that new, firm, dry ground to begin to appear. Amen.



