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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church

*This sermon is first in a series of four delivered to complement St. Thomas's Vacation Bible School program, **Rivers of Life**.*

I Can Work With This

Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a

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.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 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. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

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. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. 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. 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. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

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. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

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." 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. God blessed them, saying, "Be

fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

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. 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.

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 his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 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 he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 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. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Do you remember, as a kid, studying poetry? When the time came to write poetry, rather than beginning with the complexities of iambic pentameter, or some such scheme, generally teachers give the assignment of an acrostic poem. Acrostic poems concern themselves with the first letter of each line or stanza, sometimes based on, say, your name or the alphabet. Ancient Hebrews *loved* these sorts of schemes. The longest psalm, Psalm 119, is an acrostic poem, the first stanza consisting of lines all that begin with *aleph*, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and then, in the second stanza, all the lines begin with *bet*, and so on through the last letter, *tav*. So, it has always been a question about why, exactly, the first account of creation—indeed *both* creation accounts in Genesis, this poetic one that uses the theme of days to organize it, and the second, narrative account that organizes around the creation of the human family—don't begin with *aleph*, but with *bet*. Not the first letter, but the second. For a society that prizes the structure of narratives and language, and given that word order doesn't matter as it does in English, and given

that the name of God used in this story is Elohim, which begins with *aleph*, and so could be the very first word, why would the author and the editor let the very first word of the very first story, the story about beginnings and creation be *bet*? Why would we let it begin with *bet*? It is chaos! Beginning with *bet*! But God has a knack for creating from chaos something good.

Alongside this riveting debate about beginning with *bet*, there is a long-standing debate, and by “long-standing,” I mean thousands of years old, about whether or not there was anything with God at the moment of creation. Was it just God and nothing else? Or was there something that was there—some not-God primordial ooze or something with God in the beginning? The first two verse of Genesis prime the pump for this debate, verse one suggests only God, but verse two brings in a “formless deep.” I’m a Lutheran, so I generally solve this question, “Did God creation from nothing or from chaos?” with the answer, “Yes.” You say, “But it isn’t a yes or nor question.” Indeed. I like both. On the one hand, if the only thing at the beginning is God, then in order for God to create, God has to create room within God’s self to make the universe. The image is of a womb, and God as Creator becomes a mother who bears creation into being. It is a beautiful image. On the other hand, if God creates from chaos—a theory that actually jives kind of nicely with theories about dark matter and dark energy, if you’re into that kind of theoretical physics—if God creates from chaos, then there is hope for the chaos within me. Then there is hope for the chaos in our society and in our world.

If in the beginning there is the deep, formless void, this ultimate not-God stuff, then we can, in some way, imagine God tenderly scooping up everything God is not and creating it into something with which God is ultimately satisfied. God creates light and calls it good. God made sky, land, and sea and called it good. And trees and fruit and vegetables - good. Sun, moon, stars - good. Living creatures - all good. And if God doesn’t call it good, God deems worthy of blessing - people and the Sabbath, the day of rest. Out of everything God isn’t, God made the universe and called it good and blessed and holy, as God is.

Now, it is important to remember Genesis 1:1 may be the first verse we encounter when we open our Bibles, but it was not the first verse written. Indeed, huge swaths of what we now have as the Bible were written long before this poem saw the light of day. Indeed huge swaths of the *history* the Bible catalogs were lived before this account was penned. Most Biblical scholars believe this account of creation—and likely most of the first five books of the Bible—were written during the sixth century before the common era (that is, before the birth of Christ) while the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. There, they likely encountered the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation story, a story in which the world is created by younger gods from the remains of the old gods. In that story, the world is little more than an afterthought, and humanity an annoying burden. The Israelites responded to these stories with their own, but in this story, this account of creation that we read today, a loving God creates humanity with purpose and genuinely delights in what is made. This creation account was written to fill the exiles with hope. Our God lives, it says. Our God

lives and out of the chaos of our lives, our God makes new beginnings. There are always beginnings.

This story is not a story about *how* the world came into being. It is not a science textbook, thanks be to God. This is a story that tell us *that* the world came into being and that the creative force behind it is a loving God who is able to transform chaos into goodness.

Beloved, perhaps you have a neatly ordered life and mind and you cannot empathize with this, but I have to tell you, this story is good news for me. Inside of me, quite often, is a swirl of chaos. It is regret at what I've done or said or not done and not said. It is a constant list of all the things I wish to be but am not. It is an indictment against the million paper cuts of my past and an insistence that I *can* never be good, because I *have* never been good. Inside me, often, is chaos. But when I hear this story, I hear God crack God's knuckles, pick up an artist's brush and say, "Good. I can work with this."

And Beloved, when I look at this disorder of this world—when I think about what we have just witnessed in Israel, and when I think about the streets of Minneapolis just one year ago, when I think about Seminary Park here, in Bloomington, in December, when I think about the pandemic, and when I think about the plastic polluting our water and our ever-warming atmosphere—when I think about the utter chaos of life, I hear the artist that is God grab a chisel, and the physician that is God grab a scalpel, and the accountant that is God grab a calculator, and the writer that is God pick up a pen, and I hear the Creator say, "Good. I can work with this."

God creates from the chaos in me and in you and in society and in the universe and what God makes, God finds deeply satisfying. What God makes, God calls good.

Beloved, wherever in your life is chaos, whatever in you life is not-God-ly, not right. I urge you to trust that God has already begun to create something new in you, saying, "Good. I can work with this."

Amen.