

[14 PENT 1stLU let there be LIFE]

14 PENTECOST

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FIRST, MARSHALL

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Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 139:1-14a; John 1:1-5

*Let there be...LIFE!**Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

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. Genesis 1:1-2



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 waters...

*ba ra-sheet ba-ra el-o-him
et ha-sha-may-im, v'et ha-ar-etz
v'ha-ar-etz hi-ya-ta to-hu va-vo-hu
va ho-sheck al p'nay ta-hom
v'ru-ach el-o-him
me-re-ke-fet al p'nay ha may-im*

Is the world of nature a place of kindness and goodness, or...is it a place that's driven by the rule: the survival-of-the-fittest?

It **can** know good moments – there are some truly adorable pictures on the internet of cats caring for rats, lions lying down with lambs, all kinds of animals peacefully living with others it would normally eat-or-be-eaten-by...



One of my favorite stories is about an abused dog that had been brought to an animal shelter... No one there was able to make much of a connection with the animal... And yet...the staff quickly discovered that this dog had an amazing talent. It had a special knack, an exceptional feeling, a wonderful gift...for welcoming new and frightened animals to the shelter – of all shapes and sizes.

It never warmed up to human beings, but put it next to a new, frightened creature of any size or any type, and that dog's mothering spirit kicked into high gear...her empathy, her compassion, her hovering nature helped ease those new animals' anxieties, helped calm their fears, helped evaporate the apprehension they all felt in a new and frightening situation.

Though such stories are wonderfully able to capture our concern and compel us to consider a quality of kindheartedness...it's that way because they **are** the exception...*rather* than the rule...am I right? **Can I get a sad sort of...amen??**

So – by nature – the world is NOT *a place of kindness and goodness*. We can argue that it SHOULD BE and, for those of us in the Church, we profess that way back in the Garden of Eden it ***once*** WAS...but I'm pretty sure that no one could defend for long the assertion that Nature is mostly defined by a sense of *peace on earth and goodwill toward all*. **Do you agree??**

In fact...we're given a hauntingly beautiful, and almost visceral, experience of the opposite truth right here in our bible passage. Creation's darkly threatening side is painfully obvious in these first two verses.

You've heard the words in both English and Hebrew – and on the screens now there's an image of one person's vision of what this PRE-creation milieu might have looked like... It's a setting that is far from peaceful...



Imagine yourself all alone...
 Trying to stay afloat...
 In an unending expanse of ocean...
 It's a dark, stormy night...
 The waves are tossing you to and fro...
 You can't see a thing...
 You're running out of energy to stay afloat...
 Your imagination runs wild about *any-and-every-bad-thing* that could be
 lurking under those waves...
 ...there is no hope for help...or...is there???

One truth this creation story makes abundantly clear is that human beings are *sighted* creatures – we function at our best when we clearly see the world around us. From the universal experience of bumping into furniture in the middle of the night, to the universal fear of scary things-that-go-bump in the night, we are, by nature, created AND conditioned to assess the world around us primarily by sight.

Just think back to the last time you were in a power outage. Picture yourself walking into a darkened room. You know FULL WELL that the electricity is off – yet what's the very first thing we do? Flip the switch... We were created, and we've perfected the ability, to adapt based on our ability to see.

So...one of the most frightening scenarios for us is to find ourselves caught in a threatening situation where we *cannot* see... a star-less, moon-less, light-less night...a pitch black room...it's no surprise that the conventional introduction to horror stories reads, *It was a dark and stormy night...*

When I was a kid out in Shelby, Montana, the house we lived in featured a wide-open dark basement. At one end was a set of walled-off stairs, at the other end was a t.v. (a whopping 13" screen!!), and the area in-between served as a huge play room/work room/whatever room.

One of the games my brothers and I liked best was to scare the daylights out of a sibling who was down there playing or watching t.v. We'd tip-toe down the stairs and sneak up behind the unsuspecting child, then let out a blood-curdling yell and collapse in laughter!



The poor victim would scream, then scream bloody murder and threaten to get even...or worse, tell Mom!!!

Well, one Saturday afternoon I was the one watching t.v. when I happened to hear the upstairs door open and shut very quietly. So immediately I made my way in the dark to the stairs along the wall – I could just picture my one of my brothers getting ready to leap out and scare me...a scenario that fed right into my diabolical plans.

After a moment of listening to some fumbling motions, I saw the beam from a flash light...and used it as my cue to launch a pre-emptive strike – I jumped on to the landing and yelled with all my might... and scared the life out of the poor meter-reader guy!!! He let out a yell, fell backward on the steps, dropped his flashlight and folder...and, come to think of it, I don't remember ever seeing him again reading the meter at the Fuller house...

As I said, we are sighted creatures, and when we cannot see, it feels to us like Nature is in chaos: storms, power outages, illnesses... So put yourself in that opening scene of creation, and imagine witnessing that reality-altering, mind-boggling, relation-blessing event.

Be-re-sheet bara Elohim...

*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...

It's like we're a victim of a shipwreck, clinging to a piece of wood, on a dark, stormy night. Waves crash over us, we can't see a thing, and we're sure that we're gonna die...

Yet even while that's happening...we're given a fleeting glimpse...of a possible word...of good news...says the text, *a **wind** from God swept over the face of the waters...* Now the Hebrew word for **wind**, **ruah**, can also mean **breath**, as well as **spirit**...

I like to think that in this circumstance, it means all three – *darkness covered the face of the deep...while God's spirit, breath, wind swept over those dark and chaotic waters...*



Then get this twist – I learned it from our daughter who's studying O.T. Theology at Emory University. According to Rachel, when we read in our bible that *a **wind/breath/spirit** from God swept over the waters...* the Hebrew word for *swept* can equally be read as *hovered*...

So let's take a moment and think of the difference between *sweeping* and *hovering*...

Sweeping – at home we sweep up messes. In politics/business we sweep things under the rug. When an airliner goes down over the ocean, we sweep the ocean for any sign of life... The point is either to clean up a mess or cover as much territory as possible at first looking for survivors, but all too frequently finding only wreckage. Here's a question:

Is that a fundamentally positive image filled with hope?? ...or is it the opposite, an image which says that the ending has already been written – and that it will not be a story of life, but of death.

Now, think of the scenes of watery chaos we've seen from Texas – and now Florida – over the last week. One universal image sticks out in my mind – that of a helicopter hovering over victims of the flood...pulling them up, away from death, and into a future that speaks of life. It may not be easy, and it may involve some pain, but that hovering helicopter with its helping hands is infinitely better than a sweeping airplane looking for signs of a wreck...

So from that hovering helicopter, I'm also drawn to the biblical image, mentioned by Jesus, toward the end of his ministry. He looks out at the Holy City of Jerusalem, and sees instead of its holiness, the emptiness and cold-heartedness of any city anywhere.

Laments the Lord: *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it!
How often I have longed to gather your children together,
as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings,
but you were unwilling!
(Matthew 23:37)*

Chickens aren't the most respected representative of the bird family – I can think of sports teams that are proud of their favorite fowl: the Cardinals, the Eagles, the Blue Jays, Orioles and Falcons...the University of Oregon athletes are even honored themselves Ducks... But I can't think of any team that calls itself – the Chickens! Can you?

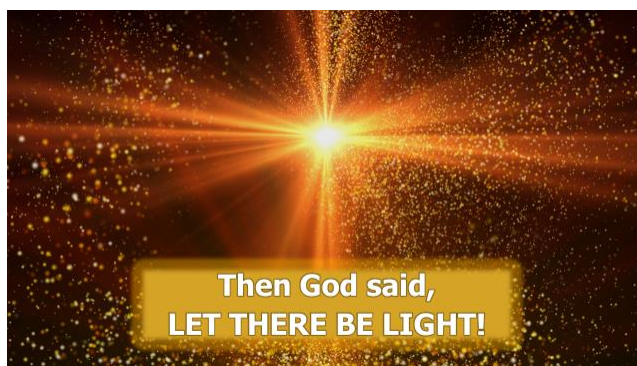
And yet, some would argue that mother chickens can be incredibly brave. A pastor tells this story: *Have you ever seen a chicken hawk go after its prey? The mother hen is often aware of the presence of the hawk in time to gather her chicks under her wing. With a furious fuss she squawks till her brood is safe by her side. She fluffs out her wings and protects them with her own body.*

As the chicken hawk dives, the hen turns her body toward it and cocks a wary eye without moving from her children. The predator comes in again for the kill and the mother spreads her wings even wider. A third time he dives only to be thwarted by the determined self-sacrifice of the mother hen.

<https://soundfaith.com/sermons/111464-god-as-mother-hen-protects-all>

She hovers over her children, fully committed to protecting them from danger, even if it means sacrificing her life...

I love this notion that, at creation, God's Spirit is hovering, eager to protect and preserve what God is about to create. This positive holy and hovering presence is supported by the first few words of the very next verse. We read:



The Lights came on, the darkness was put in its place, and so began God's great plan. Heaven's goal was to create a MASTERPIECE of an environment that would feature, as its crowning act of creation, the mystery called life.

I want to say a quick word here about the so-called battle between creationism and evolution. The fact is, they don't have to be mutually exclusive. Every step along the way of those six days of creation happened exactly as was needed to support human life. Mix two of them up and the whole process is destroyed.

I find it fascinating that those same days of creation mark the very same evolutionary periods that were needed to support and sustain life – from the BIG BANG of God's cry, LET THERE BE LIGHT, to the vegetation and sea life that led to the appearance of land animals, and, ultimately, human beings.

The Bible doesn't care about the answer to the question **HOW DID CREATION COME TO BE?** The Bible's big questions are: **WHO DID IT** and **WHY?** And here's the answer: GOD created us to LOVE.

Now, by definition, God has the ability to speak creation into existence in six 24 hour periods, right? If God is GOD, then he could even wave a wand, sing out, *Bibbety-bobbity-boo!* And the universe, and everything in it, would have come to be. *So could not God also have orchestrated creation over 6 epochs of time that each spanned millions of years???*



Again, the Bible doesn't care about the HOW – only the WHO and the WHY: and regardless of the HOW, the answer is always the same: GOD created us to LOVE. So when God said, *Let there be light!*, God was really saying, ***LET THERE BE LIFE!***

The Gospel writer John affirms this in his opening verses as we read earlier:

-In the beginning was the WORD...and

-All things came into being through him...and

-What has come into being 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 (John 1:1-5).

Say that with me:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it!

Thanks be to God! Amen!