

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." OK... Was that literally, as some would have us believe? In absentia via the Big Bang? Through Intelligent Design?

You know what? I don't care.

And I don't have to. Because (a) I'm a Baptist and (b) I'm a poet. We American Baptists are not of a literalist tradition. We are seekers — forever striving toward spiritual connection and growth — which requires creativity. And we poets love metaphor. You remember metaphors from high school English class? A metaphor is a word or phrase that compares two things in a non-literal way. "You are my sunshine" - metaphor. "All the world's a stage" - metaphor.

Now the Bible is full of metaphors. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Ever hear anyone argue the point that God is a literal shepherd and we are literal sheep? No - metaphor. "But now O Lord, we are the clay and you are the potter." Ever been obliged to think of yourself as an actual pot or vase? No - metaphor.

Some are more complicated. "I am the bread of life; those who come to me will not hunger." Not so hard, perhaps. But then, there's this: "While they were eating, Jesus took the bread, and after blessing it, gave it to them saying 'Take, eat. This is my body.'" Really? Christian cannibalism or metaphor?

OK. Enough on the English lesson. Back to Genesis. If in the beginning God created, and shortly thereafter we are told we were created in the image of God, then we too are creators. Every - single - one - of - us. We tend to limit our notion of creativity to those we deem to be "artists" — painters, sculptors, actors, violinists. But let's get real. The finest creations in this church ran exuberantly off to Sunday School a few minutes ago. And some of you out there created them. Literally. (Good job!)

Some mighty fine preaching flows from this pulpit on Sunday mornings — creativity! And this community — a thing of beauty co-created by all of us and re-created each time we meet. We don't always get it right. But as Michael Miller pointed out, like an oil painter we are constantly in the process of scraping it down and building it back up — creating, letting go, creating, letting go — because creativity is a process, just as spiritual practice is a process.

In my life, spiritual metaphor is weft to the warp of everything else. It is what adds richness and meaning, color, depth and wonder. "God" is metaphor to me — the key of A minor in a C major world. In my youth, as I know is true for many of you, I became disenchanted with all things religious - walked out of the church and planned never to return. The teachings of Jesus — especially the admonition of today's Gospel lesson — to love our neighbors — seemed less important to most Christians I knew than the upholding of the political and cultural status quo. I was DONE.

But in the years to come, I began to notice something through my writing. Words like "advent" and "resurrection," "baptism" and "redemption" cropped up frequently, as did snippets of hymns, lines of Scripture, and references to grace. I could walk away, but apparently I could not escape the pervasiveness of these concepts and images - these spiritual metaphors, if you will. Nor did I want to. They worked for me. And the more I came to understand this, the more I embraced it.

Just out of college I taught junior high school for a few years, and ran a theater program. I wrote plays for children and had my young students perform them at nearby elementary schools. One such play had a story line in which a rabbit beloved by the young characters was wounded by a hunter. The bereft children gathered around this bunny and sang a healing chant. (Of course, the rabbit survived!) When a pastor friend showed up for a performance, he took me aside afterwards and said "Cherry Johnson, I don't ever again want to hear about how you don't believe in prayer!" Indeed...

You know that song, "Over my head, there's music in the air.....?" Well, over my head there are words floating around. That's been true as far back as I can remember. It's a gift for which I am deeply grateful. And I believe that we ALL have creative gifts...and that whether they find expression in drawing or cooking, singing or quilting, raising children or designing a web page or nurturing a welcoming space...our very lives are works of art through which the River of Spirit flows to the extent that we allow it.

But let's return to the creation story in Genesis. You know, after it says "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," verse 2 says "the earth was

without form and void". The Tree of Life version puts it this way: "Now the earth was chaos and waste, darkness was on the surface of the deep, and the Ruach Elohim [the breath or wind or spirit of God] was hovering upon the surface of the water." I love that image. Darkness....chaos....while nearby a breeze carries the seed of creation.

I don't know about you — but I've had about all I can take of chaos and waste and darkness recently. One of the gifts I receive from the process of writing is that it allows me to listen for that wind, that breath of creation — call it spiritual muse — and use it to transform the chaos. I want to close with an example. This is a poem in which I reflected back on my participation in a counterdemonstration this past June when a group of anti-Muslim/anti-immigrant protesters staged a rally in downtown Seattle.

STANDING FOR TRUTH

The gauntlet had been thrown,
 A line drawn in the sand.
 They had announced their intent to come to the city
 From surrounding rural towns
 (Where progressives don't gather on every street corner)
 To proclaim that Muslims were not welcome here.
 Leftist social media had lit up quickly,
 And our throngs planned to gather for a counter-demonstration
 On that Saturday morning.

Us

And *Them*.

The police were ready —
 A fence and a line of armed officers
 Standing between the warring factions
 To ensure very little dialogue
 And no physical confrontation took place.
 It was effective.

They stood uphill from us shouting slogans;
We marched in a narrow oblong space below,
 Which didn't bother us since we were certain we held

The moral higher ground
 (And we made sure we had clergy
 prominently featured to drive home this point).
 It was crowded and noisy,
 And the two sides
 Couldn't really hear each other.
 It was, in many ways, a pointless exercise
 Except for a small media presence.
 I had attended out of my desire to ensure their message
 Was not the only one being heard,
 Which is the whole point of a counter-demonstration.
Us
 And *Them*.

Us:
 Left-leaning and self-righteous,
 Sure of our truth —
 That inclusion is a sacred mandate,
 That there is no "other."
 Proud,
 There to show the world (and our allies)
 Our unrelenting stance.
 Lifting our voices
 Against hatred,
 Against prejudice,
 Against xenophobia
 And xenophobes,
 Against the powers that be,
 Against *Them*.

Them:
 Right-leaning and self-righteous,
 Sure of their truth —
 That protection of their loved ones is a sacred mandate,
 That strangers can be dangerous.
 Proud,
 There to show the world (and their allies)
 Their unrelenting stance.
 Lifting their voices

Against lack of vigilance,
 Against godlessness,
 Against liberalism
 And liberals,
 Against those who would not accept the shift of power,
 Against *Us*.

I stayed until it seemed they were losing steam,
 Then slowly began to move away, wondering
 If my presence had served any purpose.

It was then I saw him —
 A lone one of *Them*,
 Standing quietly apart from his fellow demonstrators
 On the edge of their cordoned-off patch of asphalt,
 Looking down at *Us* —
 A somber-looking white man in his forties,
 Wearing dockers and a light jacket,
 And holding a large sign which said in plain black letters:

CHOOSE
 KINDNESS

In that moment,
 The political armor I had donned months earlier
 Began to feel constraining.
 I no longer wanted to drown *Them* out
 Or prove *Them* wrong
 Or feel righteous.
 I only wanted to know him,
 And to explain that the very reason I was a part of *Us*
 That day
 Was because I too wanted people to
 Choose Kindness.

In the weeks since,
 I have thought about him nearly every day.
 I have imagined sitting across the table from him
 In a diner

Or a bar
And swapping stories about
What kindness means
And how each of us ended up in that place
On that Saturday morning.
I have wondered what gave him the courage to stand apart
From his group
And from ours.
And I have been grateful to him
For inspiring me to focus less on
Undermining
And more on *understanding*
My adversaries.

May it be so.....