

United Church in the Valley: January 13, 2018  
Student Minister: Matthew Heesing  
***Making Space for the Spiritual...***  
**“...through Wonder”**

Scripture Reading:

*Genesis 1:1-2:2:*

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Now at first, the earth was formless and empty,  
chaos was over the surface of the deep,  
and the Spirit of God was hovering over the primordial waters.

But then God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light.  
God saw that the light was good,  
and God separated the light from darkness.  
God named the light Day, and the darkness Night.  
And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day.

Then God said, “Let there be a dome in the middle of these waters,  
to make space between the waters and separate them.”  
So a dome was fashioned, space was made:  
God called the space above the dome, Sky.  
And there was evening, and there was morning: the second day.

Then God said, “Let the waters under the sky group together  
so that space might be made for dry ground to appear.”  
And so it happened:  
God named the dry land Earth,  
and God named the gathered waters Sea.  
And God saw that it was good.  
And then God said, “Let the earth produce plants—  
plants that produce their own seeds,  
and every kind of fruit tree that bears fruit with seeds in it.”

And so it was: the earth brought forth every kind of plant with seeds,  
and every kind of fruit tree possible.  
And God saw that this was good.  
And there was evening, and morning—the third day.

Then God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky,  
to make space between the day and the night.  
These lights will mark events, sacred seasons, days, and years,  
shining light upon the earth.  
And so it was: God made the stars and two great lights:  
the larger light to rule over the day,  
and the smaller light to rule over the night.

And God saw that this was good.  
And there was evening, and there was morning: the fourth day.

Then God said, "Let the waters be filled with creatures,  
and let birds fly above the earth, throughout the sky."

And so it was:  
God created all sorts of swimming creatures,  
and all the winged birds.  
And God saw that this was good, and blessed them all, saying,  
"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters and the skies."

And there was evening, and there was morning: the fifth day.

Then God said, "Let the earth be filled with every kind of living thing:  
livestock, crawling things, and wildlife."

And so it was: God made every kind of wildlife,  
every kind of livestock,  
and every kind of creature crawling on the ground.  
And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our own image,  
to be like us.  
Let them be stewards of the fish in the sea,  
the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals,  
and everything that crawls."

So God created humankind in God's own image,  
in the divine image, God created them.

God blessed the humans and said, "Be fruitful and multiple,  
fill the earth and be responsible for every living thing.  
You are the caretakers of the animals;  
all the plants and trees are under your care."

And God saw everything that God had made,  
and it was very good.  
There was evening, and there was morning: the sixth day.

Thus, the heavens and the earth  
and every living thing was completed.  
On the seventh day, God rested.

God blessed this seventh day and called it holy,  
because on it, God rested from the work of creation.  
This is the account of creation.

Sermon:

*“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”*

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Perhaps even *too* familiar.

Most of us, if not all of us, I'm sure,  
have heard this story many times before:

*“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”*

Yet in spite of how familiar  
this might sound to you and me,  
there is *always* something new to see  
in every one of our stories from Scripture—  
in fact, the ancient Jewish rabbis, our religious ancestors  
often compared our stories from Scripture to a diamond—  
a diamond with seventy sides or faces,  
each reflecting something new  
with every fresh approach and turn and angle—  
for when you examine the stories of Scripture  
with a sense of openness, of awe and wonder,  
you never know exactly what you might find.

So with that in mind, this morning,  
I want to turn the story of Creation,  
to examine another side, a different angle,  
and share an understanding  
that likely will be new to you—  
and it all has to do with the Hebrew word *tzimtzum*.

But first, we have to talk about the purpose of poetry,  
which will lead us to the idea of zimzum,  
which will lead us to the importance of wonder,  
and wonder will tie it all together with  
our new sermon series of  
making space for the spiritual.  
So first, let's talk about the purpose of poetry.  
Which is important,  
because the story of Genesis 1, of Creation,  
is actually a poem.

It might not look or sound that way,  
in our Bibles and in our minds today,  
but in the original Hebrew language,  
as it was written and read and heard  
and re-told in an oral society,  
Genesis 1 originated as a poem.

Even now, in our modern English rendition,  
it's possible to catch some recognition,  
of the lyrical cadence and repetition,  
just listen:  
and God said,  
and God said,  
and God said,  
and there was light,  
and there was sky,  
and there was earth,  
and there were animals,  
and it was good,  
and it was good,  
and it was good,  
and it was very good,  
and there was morning,  
and there was evening,  
the first and second, third,  
and fourth, the fifth,  
and sixth,  
and finally, the seventh day.

The way that this story is written  
is first and foremost as a poem.

And as with any piece of poetry,  
therefore, the purpose of this specific poem  
is not to state scientific fact,  
as some of our fellow Christians proclaim,  
or to communicate an exact account of history,  
but more, to capture mystery,  
to move us in feeling,  
in the deepest depths of our innermost being.

Indeed, poems have this ability to  
profoundly capture powerful concepts,  
in ways not possible for paragraphs of prose.

And instead of trying to share,  
the literal who and what and when and where,  
*every* piece of poetry takes care  
to leave some things vague  
and open to interpretation;  
poetry is an invitation  
on a journey,  
not journalism,

though every poem nonetheless contains  
 truth and wisdom  
 about the way things are  
 and the way they could be—  
 but rather than explain  
 and spell it out to you and me,  
 poems, instead,  
 intend to leave some blanks  
 for our own sense of awe  
 and imagination to take hold.

And as this particular poem of Creation has been told  
 over countless millennia,  
 repeated over campfires  
 and in tabernacles and in temples,  
 many Jewish rabbis,  
 would construct their own understandings  
 of this story  
 through a careful process  
 of communal insights  
 conversations  
 and commentary on Scripture  
 that they called Midrash:  
 the art of filling  
 the blanks of the Bible.

To recap, then, briefly:  
 the story of creation is a poem.  
 And as a poem, there's no one right or wrong answer,  
 it intentionally offers ample room for  
 interpretation.  
 And one such traditional Midrashic interpretation  
 of this poetic account of Genesis 1  
 is a word pronounced *zimzum*.  
 Say it with me:  
*tzimtzum*.<sup>1</sup>

*Tzimtzum* is a Hebrew word  
 that means contraction, or constriction,  
 and it's a word that has been used  
 in the context of the creation story  
 for centuries  
 to explain how it all started.

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<sup>1</sup> This following, simplified understanding of *tzimtzum* is adapted from Rob and Kristen Bell, *The Zimzum of Love* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 18, along with <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzimtzum>.

The idea of *tzimtzum*, you see,  
 involves the assumption  
 that before there was anything,  
 there was God.  
 Before anything else existed,  
 the spiritual was all that there was,  
 the source of love completely filled  
 all conceivable space and time  
 and so in order for something else to exist,  
 something other than God,  
 God had to somehow make room.  
 And according to this *tzimtzum* understanding,  
 the divine chose to contract, constrict,  
 step back so that something else,  
 something other than God,  
 could come alive and have somewhere to be.

In order for the entire universe—for you and me—to  
 emerge and take place,  
 the spiritual had to first make space.

This notion of *tzimtzum*, therefore, fills in the blank of  
 of what happened right before the *beginning*,  
*[when] God created the heavens and the earth*.  
 In the very beginning, God first made room.  
 The spiritual made space for us.

Now you might be thinking,  
*Matthew, this is a bit much to take in.*  
*What you're talking about—*  
*it's beyond me.*  
 But that's precisely the point.  
 For that's exactly what the spiritual is and ought to be—  
 something beyond what we can ever take in,  
 something much, and more,  
 something mysterious right to the core,  
 something we can glimpse but never completely grasp—  
 for if the holy were anything less than all that,  
 it would wholly cease to be the spiritual,  
 and simply be human,  
 wouldn't it?

The story of creation, this poetic explanation  
 of God making space for us to exist  
 moves us along from  
 any literal insistence or understanding  
 and into a state and sense of wonder:

a wonder of probing beyond what we see,  
 a wonder of pondering how can this be,  
 a wonder of immense, intense curiosity,  
 of asking why  
 of mystery and awe.

This piece of poetry  
 pushes us past any concrete assertions  
 of the creation account  
 to consider how the spiritual makes space for us.  
 And that consideration moves us to wonder.  
 And wonder is how *we*  
 make space for the spiritual, in response.  
 Now, why does this matter?  
 Well, one might say, in our world today,  
 we don't have a lot of room for wonder.

Maybe it has to do with growing up, with growing old—  
 we don't lay down under the clouds like we did  
 as children enamored by the shifting sky, any more,  
 we don't ask *why*  
 as often as before.  
 We have infinite answers at our fingertips  
 and yet don't take the time to ask better questions.  
 We are too content with what we can just see with our eyes,  
 even though our Enlightened empirical modern mindset  
 has more or less  
 left us feeling empty. Is this really all there is?  
 Not to mention, we're so caught up in worries  
 about the future,  
 news of walls and riots and wars,  
*wonder* is a luxury  
 we think we can't afford  
 in a fast-paced, frenzied, anxious world.  
 No wonder,  
 it seems we've crowded out the spiritual;  
 no wonder.

But the story of Creation  
 moves us to consider  
 how the Spiritual makes space for us.  
 And considering how the Spiritual  
 makes space for us  
 moves us to a state of wonder.  
 And a state of wonder moves us  
 to make space for the Spiritual in response.

With a sense of *wonder*  
in our mind and soul,  
we make space for the spiritual,  
all because the Spiritual makes space for us.

From the very start  
and at the heart  
of our creation story  
is a poem about the  
spiritual making space for us;  
and the rest of the story, from Genesis onward,  
tells how humanity has been trying to  
make space for the spiritual  
ever since.

And it all starts with wonder—  
in the Bible,  
and in our lives.

So people of God,  
let us wonder.  
Let us ask our questions,  
bask in awe.  
Let us dare to embrace  
that which is beyond our understanding,  
expanding our appreciation  
for mystery and something more,  
engaging our deepest imaginations  
about the divine.

Through wonder,  
let us start to make space for the spiritual,  
just as the spiritual makes space for us.  
Amen.