

“Day One” based on Gen 1:1-8
Cape May Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Nicole Wilkinson
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My father was in the Navy for eleven years of his life, and he loved to watch the skies and predict the weather. But he was also a supremely optimistic guy, so his prediction was almost always the same—it’s going to clear up. He would have gotten up on a morning like this and pronounced—this is going to blow over. Dad, we sometimes had to say, it’s a hurricane. Ten minutes; the sun’s going to burn off those clouds. So if that helps, that’s from Malcolm Wilkinson to you. Ten minutes.

My dad was also a student of the past, particularly his own. He told us many times the story of how he and my mother met, at a USO dance in Trenton, New Jersey. For him it was an effort I think to regain that early energy and certainty, to see any patterns that might appear across the expanse of time between 1945 and the current year. What seemed to have been divinely ordained, what had been a wrong turn, a deadend. But of course, in his sunny view, there had been very few wrong turns.

Maybe I learned from him, that beginnings are powerful. The Bible tells us not once but twice how the world began; then the gospels and the Book of Acts tell us in their way, this is how the Christian community began. We retell these stories to orient and measure ourselves, to find that early energy and spirit.

There’s a sort of framework for social media posts, when someone is posting about a home improvement project or a particular ambitious craft—you see two pictures: how it started (the before picture) and then how it’s going (the in process show of progress photo). All of scripture could be seen as a sort of spiritual social media post—“how it started” with these stories of origin; “how it’s going.” With all the turmoil, blessing, and struggle that continues to this day.

The story of our beginnings that Genesis 1 tells us has this most important thing to say: God is the creator. Forget, for a moment all God’s other identities, and all the blessings and curses each one brings for our limited understanding of who God is. Forget for a moment father (and mother), forget judge, guiding providence, forget just for a moment even a very present help in trouble. God is first and foremost our creator. Not only the creator of you and me, of humanity. Though that aspect alone establishes who we are, as well as who God is. We are not the ultimate

power, the ultimate source—not of ourselves, much less of the universe. God is our creator, our source. But God is also the creator, creator of all things.

I stake no claim on the science of how the universe came to be the way it is. It's interesting, mind you, and the more we learn about the millennia that happened before human beings came on the scene, the more we understand about who we are. But what we believe is not that God created by some particular means. Especially since Gen 1 and 2 describe two different means by which the writer imagines creation. In this chapter, God speaks and makes things happen. God's word creates light, and separates it from darkness, and eventually human beings, male and female, simultaneously. In Genesis 2, though, God reaches down as with human hands and forms the human being from the dirt, and breathes life into the that piece of clay sort of like Ruth breathes life into the flute.

Each story calls us to imagine God as creator—a great, powerful, distant, disembodied force of creation in chapter one, or an intimate, tender, magical craftsman in chapter two. The point is less *how* God creates, and more *that* God creates. Not by accident, not by violence as other religions of the time believed, but intentionally, lovingly, systematically, and with care.

Which leads us to the question, how do we live in a world that God so carefully created? How do we live as God's creatures and with God's creatures? We do so with humility, most of all. With the sense that all created beings are our family. In Genesis 1, every climate, every ecosystem, every living creature has its turn and is created purposefully; every part of creation has its place and connects in a system the endless complexity of which we are only just beginning to understand. Our lack of that humility is costing us, and it is costing creation.

When Ahmet was in about sixth grade, he learned about acid rain, and he was, appropriately, appalled. Did you know that sometimes because of pollution, even the rain can be polluted? he asked me. That the rain can actually hurt plants instead of watering them? He went on, *The rain?* He was clearly having trouble expressing how much this bothered him. Yes, son, I said, I'm sorry to tell you, that we have even screwed up the rain.

That was ten years ago or more. Imagine what sixth graders are learning about right now. As writer Louise Erdrich does in her 2017 novel, imagine a world that remembers the last time it snowed, and I mean the very last time. It isn't that hard to imagine, I'm sorry to say.

The damage done and being done is enough to make you despair. How long we have understood that we are doing God's creation damage, and yet we keep on doing it. God's creation will survive, because it has an incredible kind of resilience. George Carlin used to point out that there was no need to save the planet. The planet isn't actually in trouble; we are. "The planet," he said, "is going to shake us off like a bad case of fleas." God's creation will survive; it is nothing if not adaptable. But the distortions it could undergo are terrible to consider.

To be clear, this human lack of humility is not entirely about you and me. Yes, it has to do with the plastic of our disposable water bottles and meat in our diets and the gas in our cars, absolutely. But it also has to do with the profit margins of the oil industry, the slow turning radius of an economy built on growth, growth, growth, which any child can tell you is a plan for disaster. It is up to us not only as consumers, but as voters and advocates. We need to reduce our consumption of plastic, dig out our reusable grocery bags, eat less meat, hang out our laundry, and drive fewer miles; but we also need to call our senators and representatives, and advocate for green space and investment in sustainability in our own communities. Powerful nations have to make difficult decisions and they need to at least provide powerful corporations with better incentive to weigh their profits against their environmental impact.

We are called to act socially and yes, politically, not because we are Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative but because we are Christians, believers in God the creator, whose hand can still be seen in all the natural world and whose work must be valued, not thrown away.

The Smithsonian magazine assures me, there are reasons for hope. Yes, I had to go looking, because it is truly very easy to despair. And I didn't think despair would make a great sermon. Honestly, I knew some good things were happening, but I couldn't call them to mind, which is a very typical human tendency.

So here are a few reasons to hope, courtesy of the Smithsonian. At the United Nations' Climate Change Conference, more than 100 nations pledged to halt deforestation by 2030. Since trees store carbon, produce oxygen, and prevent erosion and desertification, an end to deforestation could have a huge impact. In West Africa, a species of crab that was thought to be extinct has resurfaced. And in Latin America, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, and Costa Rica announced a 'mega' Marine Protected Area to protect at-risk marine life.

And, as the Smithsonian points out, our young people are no longer taking for granted what we have always taken for granted. They are advocating, organizing, educating, and they have the sense of urgency about the situation that we would do well to emulate. They give us hope.

It's important to remember on the one hand that every act of disrespect and desecration of creation has had and continues to have repercussions. But it's also important to remember that every act of respect, care, and reverence for creation, every act that treats creation as God's artistry, also has repercussions.

God is the creator, but we are created in God's image. We have power over other creatures, power over creation itself, and we have not dealt with that power well up to this point. We have acted like children left alone in the kitchen, making only cookies for everyone to eat, including the dog, until everyone is weak and sick and we still can't think of anything else to make or to do. We need to grow up. Eat our vegetables—literally, actually. Our faith begins with the story of how God created the world, including ourselves. It's past time that we begin to live into that story.