



January Theme: Creation
Breathing Life into Clay and Water

Sunday, January 8, 2012, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

Call to Worship

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

Who here has ever played in the mud? Who here has ever made a mud pie or had a mud fight? Have you shaped magical creatures or mighty walls out of mud—or simply plunged in your fingers or toes or your shoes up over the laces just to see what it feels like and what will happen next?

Today we invite you to roll up your sleeves and plunge in your hands, deep into the heavy wet clay. Lift it up to your face and take a whiff: It smells like earth and metal. It sticks to the skin between our fingers, seeps under our fingernails, drips dollops onto the floor as we carry it to the board where, splat!, we toss it down. Now we're ready to work it into something new.

“Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” We human beings have played with this mystery from the beginning of time—through story and art and science. So many creation myths begin with a god or gods who fashion humans from clay, usually mixed with water and sometimes breath for *in*-spiration. A simple Google search turns up tons of these humans-made-from-clay stories. Each story unrolls in the language and understanding of its time and place—but each one lives on because, like a poem, it reveals what the authors think about the nature and purpose of humanity, and about what is our relationship to the earth and to the Holy.

In ancient Egypt, Khnum gathers the silt and clay left behind each time the Nile River floods. The clay spins and spits off the potter's wheel as Khnum shapes new children, molding legs, torso, arms, the small column of the neck, the tiny delicate head. Khnum then places these children fully formed into their mothers' wombs. Yikes, what is *that* birth going to feel like? Yet what does this story say about the inherent wholeness of children?

In Cameroon, God first makes a *lizard* of clay and sets it to soak in a pool, as though it needs marinating. Just a week later, God calls out, “Human, step forth!”—and sure enough, a person emerges. And we thought Unitarian Charles Darwin figured out evolution!

From the western bank of the Nile, in what is now Sudan, Juok travels all over the world gathering different colors of earth, clay, and sand to form brown, black, red, or white people. First Juok makes these people all legs so they can work. Then Juok realizes they need arms so they can grow crops. Then—oops!—Juok remembers to give them eyes so they can see what they're doing and mouths

so they can eat. And, well, now life looks *so good* that Juok throws in tongues and ears so these people can dance, and sing, and shout for joy!

Don't you love how both god and humans learn and grow and change in this story?

Every time we tell *any* creation story, old or new, we create something fresh. The story (the *stories*) of where we humans and creatures and plants and earth come from, the stories of what we are, and where we're going, of why we're here—these stories, *our* story, can only come to life if *we* work with it. We are co-creators of our own lives, yes, but also of our community and our world. It's an awesome responsibility. We gather together to learn and encourage and nudge each other into taking up this responsibility. As we share creation stories today, listen for what part *we* are called to play and how we are to play it.

Come, my good people, the clay is waiting. Let's plunge in!

Story for All Ages A Creation Myth for Our Times,
by Jim Rumbaugh¹

Prologue

The Bible starts with a story about how God created the world in seven days. The people who wrote this story thought the earth was the center of the universe, so that's how their story goes. We have learned a lot about the world in the last 3,000 years, and now we know that the universe is a very big place indeed, and our world is only a small part of it. Here is a new creation story that takes a big view of the universe. Like all myths, this tale leaves out many of the details and changes others to make a better story—but parts of it match what we now know about our world.

Story

In the beginning, God created herself. Even God doesn't know where she came from, whether she came from something else, or whether she just appeared out of nothing. At first, God was just a hint of a passing thought, caught halfway between existence and nothingness, like an old fluorescent bulb that flickers dimly when you turn the switch, and sometimes it lights up, and sometime it just goes dark again. God had come from nothing, and might very well have flickered out again. It's happened to other gods who never existed. But she gathered her courage and shouted to herself, "Yes! I exist!" And so she did.

Then she looked around and found herself in a very tiny place—smaller than a kernel of corn, much smaller than a grain of sand, smaller than you can possibly

¹ Jim Rumbaugh is a member and Worship Associate at the First Unitarian Church of San José.

imagine. That's all you get when you pop into existence out of nothing. Our new God was bursting with ideas, but she felt crushed with no room in which to make anything. And so she placed her hands below, and planted her feet above, and coiled up and gave a mighty shove, the greatest push that ever was or could be. That first great push stretched space beyond all reckoning. In the blink of an eye, it grew and grew, larger than the earth, larger than the sun, larger than the Milky Way, until it was big enough to hold all the galaxies that ever will be.

When God found that she had an immense space to work with, she burst into flame, singing for joy. And the fire of her song filled the entire universe with a light brighter than we can ever know. And for a while, God enjoyed that bath of unbearably bright light.

But after some time, God realized that if fire is everywhere, nothing else can live. So she calmed her excitement, and put out her fire, and let things cool down, and let the darkness in for the very first time. Now light is a wonderful thing, and much celebrated, but so is darkness, because you need both light and darkness to see and live.

From the remnants of the fire came a thin mist, and God gathered it together into large balls, and breathed fire into them, and lit the first stars, a billion billion stars to fill all the universe. And God took the rest of the mist, and gathered it into smaller balls, and crushed them into solid rock, and put them around the stars to make worlds to live on. One of those worlds is our world, but there are billions of other worlds around other stars. After all, what kind of a God would make just one world? Nobody could possibly take that kind of a puny God seriously.

For a long time God enjoyed watching her work, as the stars burned and circled around, and occasionally one blew up in a tremendous explosion that filled the heavens with memories of God's first bright fire. But after a long time, God realized that the vast spaces were lonely. She wanted partners to share in creation. After all, if you make everything yourself, you never get to enjoy any surprises. And so she stirred the waters on some of the worlds, trying to make something that would create itself. She failed many times—after all, even God finds creation difficult, and it takes time and a lot of work. God can't just say, "Let it be," and expect miracles to happen.

Finally, on a few of the worlds, she succeeded in making a soup containing the smallest bits of life. It might not seem like much, but it was a start. You can't expect God to create complex things like eyes or brains out of nothing—she had to figure out how to get there one step at a time. So God warmed the soup and helped the new life to grow. And it did grow, and spread over the faces of many worlds. And as God created herself, life created new life. She watched, and every now and

then God would discover some new kinds of living things that had grown out of other things, and she would keep some of them, and destroy others that didn't work out. And so, step by step, she discovered algae and sponges, worms and fish, frogs and ferns, birds and flowers, mammals and oak trees, on our world, and many other things on many other worlds. God helped to guide them, but she didn't create them—every living thing has to create itself.

Finally, on some of the worlds, some of the living things began to talk and think and try to bend their worlds to their own wills. God saw them, and welcomed them, and rejoiced that she had partners in creation. God had grown much since her beginning, and she no longer felt the need to create everything herself. The thinking beings made many mistakes, but she loved them anyway. Some even destroyed their worlds, but she didn't stop them. Creators need freedom to try things, and that means that they sometimes fail. God encouraged the thinking beings to outgrow their limitations, as life has done for billions of years, but she didn't punish or reward them. What kind of a God would create life and then punish it for acting according to its nature? And the reward for living is life itself. God saw that the universe was now full of creators. She was not alone. And God saw that it was good, and she rested.

Epilogue

Is this story true? Well, maybe a little bit. Not exactly. It depends on how you look at it, like all stories. On the outside, they're all make-believe, but sometimes deep inside they hold a kernel of truth.

Readings

Genesis 1 and 2

Sermon

What's Our Part in the Story? *Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones*

Listening to those readings, to the ancient texts, I notice how my energy drops, after the delight I feel hearing Jim's "Creation Myth for Our Times." And I wonder—I wonder if those ancient texts delighted their first hearers. I wonder if there is some way that we can rediscover some sense of delight in them today.²

"No one owns the Bible," writes Carol Newsom in "Common Ground: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 2-3."³ "No one owns the Bible. Though from time to time various religious traditions have attempted to restrict who might read and

² "I notice ... and I wonder ..." is a formulation proposed by Eric Law, multicultural congregations consultant, Kaleidoscope Institute.

³ Carol A. Newsom, "Common Ground: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 2-3," in Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Press, 2000), 60.

interpret it, the Bible always manages to evade its chaperones and sneak out for a tryst with unauthorized interpreters.”

Imagine the Bible’s delight to have made it here this morning to the First Unitarian Church of San José! I can just hear the Bible saying, with relief, curiosity, maybe just a little bit of mischief, “Oh thank *God* (or Goddess, Elohim, Adonai), it is *good* ... to be here! Say, do you mind if I loosen my tie, slip out of my girdle?” (’Cuz I bet the Bible has to wear Spanx in certain settings, don’t you?) Then the Bible bubbles on (it’s a talkative book), “Oh heavens yes, thank you, I would *love* a nice cup of Free Trade coffee.”

So you and I bustle about, making the Bible feel at home, offering it our deep inclusive welcome, asking it questions, honoring its worth and dignity, recognizing that we “don’t have to think alike to love alike,” reminiscing about earlier dates the Bible has had with Unitarians, and Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists. And all the while, we 21st-century UUs are buzzing with curiosity, and maybe a little bit of mischief, too: what will we and the Bible create on *this* tryst?

What will *we* create?

That’s the main message this morning: this text—maybe all creation stories but in particular this ancient text—is *designed* to engage us in the process of interpretation and re-creation. The editors who put together these stories all those thousands of years ago—when the people of Israel were ruled by Persia and especially needed a sense of their own agency—these editors understood that leaving in the inconsistencies, placing different versions of the same story side by side, makes for “effective storytelling,” as Hebrew Scriptures scholar Jon Levenson (one of my own teachers) puts it.⁴ Effective storytelling makes *us* co-authors of the story. So if there are parts of these readings that make your blood boil—and I certainly hope there are, like the patriarchy or the heterosexism, just for instance—that’s good! That’s an invitation to enter in, to wrestle with it, to find alternatives, to keep creating.

What will *we* create? Let’s look at those questions we posed for the two readings from Genesis, and see what this clay will yield.

First, what name or names for the Holy did you hear in these two creation stories? [*take answers*] That’s right: “God” in Genesis 1 and then “Lord God” in Genesis 2.⁵ The original Hebrew words for God differ from one chapter to the next—and this means, scholars agree, that the stories come from different authors and different eras in the history of Israel. In the first story the author or authors use

⁴ Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” introductory essay in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵ Our readings today used the translation of the Jewish Publication Society from *The Jewish Study Bible*.

the Hebrew word *Elohim*, a plural noun—maybe the Holy One uses a kind of “royal we” *or* maybe it indicates a whole council of heavenly beings. In the second story, which is actually older, the author or authors use the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, the four-letter proper name for God that according to rabbinic tradition is too sacred to be pronounced. When the Tetragrammaton comes up in Jewish liturgy, worshipers substitute *Adonai*, and in English, “Lord God” is a pretty good translation for *Adonai*.

So, two different names—do we have, then, in these readings two different Gods?

Jon Levenson says that “in the ancient Near Eastern world in which Israel emerged, beginnings were deemed to be crucial, for the origins of things were thought to disclose their character and purpose.”⁶ Creation stories ask, “Where do we come from?” because if we can puzzle that out, then we’ll know more about our own intrinsic nature and what direction we should take with our lives. And to do *that*, creation stories have to wrestle with *how* we were made and with *who* or *what* made us. So the authors try to express the inexpressible—the Mystery, the riddle, the Something More, the nature of God. Remember that Unitarian Universalist saying, “What each of us knows about god [*with a small g*] is a piece of the truth”?⁷ Different authors share different visions of the Holy.

The Israelite priests who write the first story paint a rather priestly picture of God: someone whose mere words have the power to create; someone set apart, whose *job* it is to see the Big Picture and to recognize how awesome and complex *all* of creation is; someone who has the power to bless. In the second Genesis story, the author focuses on a down-to-earth understanding of humankind—literally, *adam*, Hebrew for human, is made from *adamah*, Hebrew for earth. As Arthur Waskow says in *The Torah of the Earth*, we English speakers would only get how cool this Hebrew pun is if we called ourselves *earthlings* made from *earth*—or *humans* made of *humus*.⁸ That’s how closely tied we are to the earth—we’re made of the same stuff. So if *humans* are earthy in this second creation story, the authors make *God* tactile and intimate, too. Totally anthropomorphized—God made in the likeness of humans, rather than the other way around.

And these images of God just barely scratch the surface: when we look deeply at the Hebrew, we find God like a mother hawk hovering over the original

⁶ Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” introductory essay in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ Laila Ibrahim, “Unitarian Universalism,” five sayings created for Chalice Camp.

⁸ Arthur Ocean Waskow, “Earth and Earthling, Adam and Adamah,” introduction to Arthur Waskow, ed., *The Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought*, vol. 1 (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000).

darkness to protect and feed it; God the metalworker hammering out the dome, the expanse of the sky; God the sculptor shaping the clay; God the flute player or maybe the deliverer of CPR placing God's lips to the nostrils of *adam* and blowing the breath of life into the earthling God has made.

“What each of us knows about god is a piece of the truth.” Huh, these ancient editors, by including all these contradictions, seem to be foreshadowing our own Unitarian Universalist faith. Which makes sense—because our faith has grown out of these texts, especially when the Bible has gone rogue and, on different nights throughout the ages, has slipped into Michael Servetus's or William Ellery Channing's or Margaret Fuller's or Jim Rumbaugh's room.

Next: did you notice any differences in the order of creation between these two stories in Genesis? [*take answers*] Right, big differences! I love how Levenson spells out the symmetry in the first story: God starts with an uninhabited emptiness; then, on the first three days, God creates the “domains,” still unpopulated—first light (with no valuation in the text that light is better than darkness, it's just necessary to have both for life), then sky, then land and plants. On the next three days, in the same order, God *populates* these domains—with the sun, moon, and stars; fish and birds; then land animals and humankind all at once, together. And on the seventh day, rest—a day for seeing the Big Picture and honoring all creation. The earth itself—or the whole of creation—is the “star” of this version of the story.⁹

In the second story, what's the first thing that happens? [*take answers*]

In the second story, the very first thing God does is to shape *adam* from *adamah*, the earthling from the earth. The *human* seems to be the star of this version—but I'd say that what's really the focus are the *relationships*. Because after *adam* come the plants, the garden, the water, with all of which the earthling has a direct relationship. Then God recognizes the need for, not just a “helper” or a companion, as the translations often put it, but a *sustainer*. The word used is the same used elsewhere for God's own help, God's sustaining companionship—it represents something big. So God creates the animals as kin to the earthling; they are made of exactly the same stuff—but they're not the same species. So finally we come to the tricky bit about the creation of “woman” from “man's” rib. But listen, *adam*, the original earthling, is not necessarily male. Rabbi Lori Forman suggests that this “earth creature” is genderless, or maybe bisexual, or hermaphroditic or intersex, and the creation of the second earth creature is actually what establishes gender, allowing for the possibility for procreation.¹⁰ Interesting—but still, many

⁹ Norman Habel, “Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1,” in Habel and Wurst, *Earth Story in Genesis*.

¹⁰ Lori Forman, “Bereshit: The Untold Story of Eve,” in Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 2000).

of us have problems with this passage—the binary nature of gender, when many of us now understand gender to be more fluid and complex; the designation of man and woman to be partners, when we know that flesh-of-our-flesh and bone-of-our-bone intimacy occurs between men partners or women partners too and at least. Every one of these topics deserves a sermon of its own and demands that we keep creating.

And that brings us to our third question: what words or images catch your ear or stir your mind or heart today? What struck you as you listened to the readings? *[pause]*

Here's what strikes me:

- There are some troubling sections I cannot soften or explain away. It helps to understand the original cultural context, and it helps to know I have choice. If I'm free, then I can throw some parts away, and still see the parts that can teach and guide me, such as:
- The goodness of life and creation: "God *saw* that it was good"—not "God *made* it good." God speaks, then stands back, amazed, recognizing the inherent goodness of light and dark, of sea and sky, of fish and birds and plants and animals and humans.¹¹ This story captures the awesome beauty of this world that we know—and perhaps of all the worlds we don't yet know, as Jim's myth suggests. It tells how this world has swarmed with life and diversity, and how disastrous it is to think that the earth is here for us humans to use and exploit rather than for life itself. It calls for our urgent action to love and restore this place that is our home!
- And I'm struck by the intimacy—between creation and the Mystery, of course, but especially the intimate relationship between humans and animals and earth. We are made of the same stuff. Right here in these texts, as well as in all that science has taught us since, we see how we are truly part of an interdependent web of all existence. Bound together in this intimacy, what we humans do—what you and I do—affects the whole web.

The Bible shows up here today hoping we'll shake things up, see things fresh, create something new together. But you know what part of this conversation I believe the Bible likes best? It's Jim's "Creation Myth for Our Times," especially the part where the young God, in danger of being snuffed out, "gathers her courage and shouts to herself, 'Yes! I exist!'" And then she makes space in which to create, and begins to sing for joy. The result? A universe full of creators—you and I and

¹¹ Drawn from Habel, "Geophany."

all creation, in turn, gathering our courage and shouting, “Yes, we exist!”
Becoming each other’s sustainers. And seeing, *ensuring*, that it is good. Amen.