

*Beginning, Again and Again*

January 7, 2018

Readings: "Beginning, Again" (Erick Jacobsen); Genesis 1:1 – 5

I've always had mixed feelings about New Year's Resolutions. Do you feel where I'm going here? Does anyone else have mixed feelings when they think about or make resolutions for the new year? Well, for me, the inspiration of resolutions has faded over the years because I've seen them veer down one of two paths: complete and utter neglect, or a half-hearted attempt that leads to guilt and self-criticism for not following through. And I'm not just speaking from personal experience, but from what I've seen with friends and the greater community. As some of you know, I do work in the realm of health and fitness, where I've been a personal trainer as well as a teacher in the classroom setting. Perhaps this is where my resolution crisis began – for what better way to measure the efficacy of a new year's resolution than to put yourself directly into the crucible of the most popular resolution made in the United States, which is "to be more healthy, or lose weight." Now, while this resolution is deeply admirable and one I support wholeheartedly, I have seen firsthand the gym and studio packed from January to February, thinning out through March and April, till by the summertime the idea is but a distant memory while people beat themselves up for having neglected a well-meaning attempt to better their lives. And there is a slew of reasons why this is so hard to accomplish: for in a country where health is directly correlated to income level, where food deserts are now commonplace and fast food reigns supreme, it would be disingenuous to suggest that our failure to turn around our individual health lies solely in the hands of, well, us as individuals. But there's something else at play here too, something that feels misaligned: and that is the narrow confines of finality, of totality, in a practice that asks us to start from scratch with a finished product as the goal. It is asking us to begin with potentially, nothing – from a blank place – and to produce out of that nothing. It is, to parallel the common translation of our scripture reading today, a *creatio ex nihilo* – a creation from nothing.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." How many times have you heard or think of the first line of Genesis in this way? Here's how this translation reads with the second line – "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." Now, listen again: "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." Similar, yes? But these two translations are actually entirely different. For centuries, a normalized English version of the famous first line from the Greek Bible known as the Septuagint has written verse 1 as "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth." Period. This sneaky little play on words has developed into the popular Jewish and Christian doctrine that God existed first, in nothingness, and created something – the cosmos, and everything in it – out of nothing. But what if this wasn't the only possibility? Strangely, biblical scholars have argued against this doctrine for about as long as it's been popular. Because grammatically, the second translation is most accurate to the Hebrew text, implying that *the* beginning is more like *a* beginning, that wait – the creation that we speak of was actually something out of something. It gets even trickier: for the word used for God, *Elohim*, is plural – a word that is used frequently in Genesis describing a kind of angelic council, a committee of helpers with whom God consulted frequently to make decisions. Later on, as monotheism – or belief in a single powerful deity – developed, away went the divine council into a singular entity making all the decisions, God alone. But it's only been more recently that voices of inquiry have begun to really surface and ask, what has this idea, this something out of nothing, this singularity of power, done to our conception of God, our world, ourselves – and what happens if we read it in its more authentic form, "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”?

This face of the preexistent deep, which may be understood as a kind of primordial ocean, a swelling of waters with murk, and earth, and formless stuff, exists in creation accounts from cultures all over the world, especially the near east. Ancient Greek mythology names the goddess Eurynome-Night who dances over the face of the waters; the Tao Te Ching speaks of primordial waters that were both nothing and everything, a body that it calls “the Mother of Everything.” Ovid speaks of “Chaos” as existing before heaven and earth, as the “bolus of everything.” Speaking of chaos, this is the word in Hebrew that we’ve translated into the “deep.” Darkness covered the face of *tehom*, the chaos, the waters. So why shift our gaze from the image of God hovering over the face of chaos and choosing to create something new out of its vast potential toward an image of God surrounded by nothingness, creating the cosmos in what they call *ex nihilo* – out of nothing?

The nothingness doctrine holds more power than we might first realize, for several reasons. To begin with, you may have already noticed, but the various traditions describing the chaos, the *tehom*, the face of the deep, have attributed a gender to this existence, and the gender is female. Much as we’ve attributed a male gender to God because of Hebrew grammar, so is the deep associated with the feminine, and with it, a need to tame at best and to repudiate at worst. Yet we cannot deny that we are all born through the female body, formed mysteriously within a mini version of the deep in our mother’s wombs. We emerge out of a powerful something, unformed and created by the cooperation of many forces working together. But a patriarchal social system cannot embrace or even acknowledge such a power, for it disrupts a hierarchy in which there is no cooperation; only the singular power of a male entity, creating something alone with no needs and with no help, thus rendering the feminine irrelevant, submerged, silenced. The denial of such a cooperation of powers has given way to a model that elevates masculine domination, supports unchecked power, and reinforces binaries in which there is no room for difference, for otherness, and for both/and.

In addition to the strange silencing of the feminine in our denial of the deep, this concept of zero cooperation from a masculine place of power has supported and justified the militarism of colonial invasion. How might it complicate the merciless invasion of lands and peoples if we had a cooperative sense of God’s creation of us? I propose, a lot. What if we took this image of the preexistent deep, the vast waters of chaotic potential, and alongside it also took the plurality of Elohim, to re-envision the great I Am, gathering the divine council to coax, urge, and work with the face of the deep to create the heavens and the earth? From this vantage point, creation emerges as a vast collective effort, orchestrated by the One who calls it into being. Each piece has its part, its purpose in adding to the beauty of a complex web of interconnected life. In this model that has been lost in nervous monotheistic translations, however foreign it may seem, God is both creator and co-creator, both all-powerful and generously cooperative. The both/and of this kind of creator, in its radical cooperativeness, must give pause to the traditional justification for colonialism and its desire for domination of that which is other, that which is foreign, that which is seen from the eyes of the conqueror as chaotic. Catherine Keller, who preaches and teaches on this text from Genesis 1, puts it thus: “from the vantage point of the colonizing episteme, the evil is always disorder rather than unjust order; anarchy rather than control, darkness rather than pallor.” What she’s getting at is that a worldview organized by our traditional image of God the creator, commanding and taming a wildness that only He could call into being, leaves little room for any other ways of life, any cultural differentiation, any cooperation. It has led instead to a theological justification for the inferiority of brownness and blackness against whiteness, for the claiming of lands that are already populated by a people seen as other, and the plundering of natural resources to support a way of life that is deemed to be civilized, to be correct, a way of life that is believed to be the *only* way. In

this worldview, collaboration is replaced with coercion, and creation itself is ultimately reimagined as a doctrine of destruction.

So what about us? What if we dared to expand our concept of the creation as an ultimate collaboration, a great web of formation between God, and God's helpers, and the deep, from the vast potential that has already been? As Jacob Erickson writes, fresh starts rarely happen, for good or for ill; that chaotic depths of the past all flow, sometimes tumultuously, into this moment. I don't know about you, but I've wanted to erase many things in my past that I feel ashamed of or wish had gone differently. I've wanted to rewrite, to remake, my relationships with others; I've wished that I had more control over situations that I've put myself in and situations that have exerted themselves upon me. I've played and replayed past scenarios in my mind, torturing myself for what I should have said or done. I've wanted to atone for being too close-minded, for lashing out in anger, for being too weak, for not doing enough. And I've spent many years past making new year's resolutions to work with more discipline, to seek greater enlightenment, to be kinder, more generous, more efficient, more productive, even and I'm ashamed to admit it, at the height of my theater career to be thinner, and prettier, just *better*, but all of these goals actually hid a grasping desire not to be better but to be *perfect*. And in that grasping desire for perfection I left no room for actual growth, only the possibility of reaching an endpoint that was unattainable and ultimately, dead. And you know what? I failed every time. For just as the world was created and is ever-creating, changing, shifting, and giving birth, so I've had to surrender the idea that I could somehow get to a place where I could stop becoming. A place where I had achieved all that my potential held, because if I actually did get to a finished point, there would be nothing left. No creativity, no potential, nothing new. In that weird search for perfection I found myself contracting rather than expanding, becoming the opposite of what I intended by denying the complexity of all the mistakes, of all the trauma, of all the great imperfections of my past and the imperfections of those I love in an attempt to have my own *creatio ex nihilo* – something out of nothing. So this year, a new year that's emerging out of a great deal of cultural and societal trauma, a great deal of pre-existing chaos, I propose we entertain an attempt at embracing all that has been rather than trying to erase it and start anew. In this beginning, another beginning, what does that look like for you? Perhaps it starts with replacing resolution with process. With replacing an end-goal with a sense of working-toward, allowing space for the unfinished. Perhaps it's a concerned parent reaching out to the child they struggle to get along with, allowing for the possibility that repair might take as little as a month or as long as a lifetime, and even allowing for the possibility that repair might not look like what either party imagines. It can be sitting with the grief of losing a loved one and allowing for the grief to come at you in times when you least expect, allowing that sometimes the grief doesn't fully go away, but that it has the ability to evolve, to become a little more bearable. Or maybe it looks like taking on a project, however small, to make the world a little more livable in a time where our rights and the rights of others are systematically being rolled back – whether it's volunteering at a food pantry, or a women's shelter, or maybe sharing your skills by tutoring a student once a month. And hey, maybe it is about getting physically "healthier," but rather than remaking your life or envisioning some massive transformation, you might allow for a small shift in your existing body with all its imperfections and all its wonderful possibilities, a shift that is unique to you and beautiful in its continued process into next year, and the next, and the next. In this revision of resolutions, we may find ourselves beginning to forgive where we thought we were lacking, and celebrate what we used to regret. In this revision, we may find our capacity to forgive ourselves extends to a greater capacity to forgive each other, and to forgive the hatred in those driven by fear by seeing the potential that each of us has to love. Catherine Keller says, "To love is to bear with the chaos." *To love is to bear with the chaos*. In all its discomfort, in all its imperfections, the chaos is also full of illimitable possibility. So let's bear with the chaos, beloved community. Bear with it in

the expectation of a blessing that comes with growth, rather than perfection; with progress, rather than resolution; with the process of creating something new out of something that already exists, worthy, ready, and holy in its possibility.