

“God’s Playdate”

Sermon from Proverbs 8:22-31

Given Sunday, October 3, 2021

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

*God gave birth to me at the beginning, before the first acts of creation.
I have been from everlasting, in the beginning, before the world began.
Before the deep sea, I was brought forth,
before there were fountains or springs of water,
before the mountains erupted into place, before the hills, I was born -
before God created the earth or its fields, or even the first clod of dirt.
I was there when the Almighty created the heavens,
and set the horizon just above the ocean,
set the clouds in the sky and established the springs of the deep,
gave the seas their boundaries and set their limits at the shoreline.
When the foundation of the earth was laid out,
I was the skilled artisan standing next to the Almighty.
I was God’s delight day after day,
rejoicing at being in God’s presence continually,
rejoicing in the whole world and delighting in humankind.*

—

This is World Communion Sunday. And often on this day, we talk about, we think about, our connections to people all around the world. We celebrate that we are part of a faith tradition that stretches far and wide, that encompasses more languages and rituals, more diversity, than we will ever know, because God shows up in more ways and places than we can ever know. It’s astounding, and humbling, to think about ourselves as located in that way - as some among many, who have gathered around

stories of God for thousands of years, across thousands of miles. And one of our favorite stories to tell is about how it all started. Before we do that, I wonder if you might play a game with me.

1. (TIME PERIOD)
2. (VERB)
3. (NOUN)
4. (NOUN)
5. (ADJECTIVE)
6. (PLURAL/COLLECTIVE NOUN)
7. (NOUN)
8. (ADJECTIVE)
9. (VERB)
10. (TITLE/NAME)
11. (TITLE/NAME)
12. (ADJECTIVE)

(Fill these in Mad-Libs-style with Genesis 1:1-5)

The creation story from Genesis is pretty familiar to many of us. We can mess with it, but even then, many of us know what it's "supposed" to say. We might even know that there are two creation stories in the first two chapters of that book, one ends and the other begins right on its heels. They're different from each other in lots of ways, and often we sort of mesh them together as we're talking about them... like, on the sixth day, God reaches into the mud and shapes the first human... kind of like we

put the shepherds from Luke and the Magi from Matthew in the same Christmas story - but even though the stories differ from each other, even though we know these are mythologies and not scientific explanations, there are two aspects we tend to treat as truth - even if symbolic, more than literal truth - two elements we envision as foundational to this moment: God's aloneness, and God's seriousness. Creation happens when there is only God - sometimes we even say it happens because God is lonely - and it happens deliberately, intentionally, because God, of course, is a planner above all else.

And, you know, maybe. But then we get stories like this one from Proverbs, that tells us that *the world is an act of creative communion*. That it comes from God and God's oldest friend, Wisdom, who was there for it all - that once, before there was anything else, there was friendship, there was communion - and the depth of connection there, the profound joy there, the play between God and Wisdom there was generative, was powerful enough to birth the world.

Play, says Martin Buber, is the exaltation of the possible.

I mean, think about it. When you play, aren't you also making worlds, or bits of worlds?

Maybe not always. Much of our play is just to bring us joy. We're not the only species to do it: dogs and chimpanzees and dolphins and turtles will

all play with balls, if given the chance - sea lions will toss around puffer fish like they're beach balls. An octopus will mess around with Legos. Crocodiles give each other piggy back rides. Play is in us and it is in all of creation. I wonder, then, if it's imbued in us by our creator. If maybe play is one way the image of God shows up in us, and in the world.

Jordan Reeves was born with an arm that only extends a little ways - it stops before the place where an elbow would be, so she doesn't have that, or a hand. And she faced the same difficulty lots of kids with limb differences face - which is, prosthetic limbs are really expensive. Like, tens of thousands of dollars. And for a kid who might outgrow the new limb in a few months, it just doesn't make sense to spend money like that. So, for a long time, she went without.

But when she was ten, she was invited, along with other kids with limb differences, to a workshop with engineers and design experts working in the world of 3D printing. And the engineers and designers asked the kids, if you could create a limb in a superhero context - a limb that would do whatever you wanted it to do - what would you create? And the kids worked all week - well, they played and dreamed all week - with these engineers and experts, and at the end of the workshop, Jordan, for her part, had created an attachment to her arm - that would, when she uses her one hand to pull on a string, would spray glitter everywhere.

That's where it started. Over the next year, it evolved – instead of rotating glitter canons, Jordan streamlined the original design so the glitter all shoots out of a purple unicorn horn that attaches to her arm. She's asked the engineer she's been working with about the possibility of a pirate hook next. These designs are about fifty dollars, instead of fifty thousand. And they're playful – Ingrid Fetell Lee, who wrote *Joyful*, says “rather than aiming to blend in, like traditional prosthetics, these new hands call attention to themselves. And in doing so, they disrupt the common perception that disability is a disadvantage. By framing difference in a joyful way, these 3D printed prosthetics give children a surprising new freedom to be themselves.”

This glitter arm – the pirate hook – these come to be because people get together to play. These are acts of creative communion.

Antti Lovag, a Hungarian architect, noticed that the way people move is circular: our arms and legs trace circles in the air; we have a circular field of vision; when we want to have fun, to share, we arrange ourselves in circles. He set out to design a home that acknowledged this reality, instead of one built with hard angles, like so many of our dwellings. He called it a bubble house.

He didn't get many takers – partly because his three conditions up front were “I don't know how long this will take” and “ I don't know what it will be like in the end” and “I have no idea how much it will cost you” but

occasionally, someone would come to him who wasn't bothered by any of that, and they would set out to build a house.

And here's what they would do: Lovag would come to the building site with a construction crew and no defined plan. No blueprints. He and his crew would build giant spheres out of steel mesh, and they'd roll them around on the ground. The spheres were the spaces, the armatures for what would eventually be the different rooms of the home, and this crew would play with them, like balls, rolling them around until they found an arrangement not only that they liked but that fit with the natural contours of the land. Like, where do these spheres naturally come to rest? How can what we make be a partner with the land, a friend, and not something that works against it or in spite of it?

Some of this, I'll admit, smacks of privilege. Not many among us can afford the luxury of Lovag's bubble house kind of play. But it's not all frivolity. Some play, some creation that looks like silliness, is actually, like Reeves' glitter arm, it's actually about healing. It's actually about restoring our souls.

A new elementary school was built in Connecticut a few years back and the building is curved, the whole shape of it bends inward, toward the parking lot - people have said it feels like the building is leaning in to give you a hug. The windows are staggered, made from colored glass, and look a little bit like they're bouncing up and down along the walls. Squiggly

canopies cover the entrance. The architects said they wanted to introduce the idea of play into the building itself, that too often we separate our play spaces and think the fun, the laughter, the joy can only begin once we step, say, out of the classroom and onto the playground. But this building wanted to offer that inside too.

And kids are embracing it - one of the architects was at the school for a meeting and said he stepped out of the room and into the hallway and a group of kids was running in and out of the reflections that the colored light from the stained glass made on the floor. He said, "I never would've thought of doing that." That wasn't the intent of the design. But maybe a playful design invites more play. Maybe that play can help to heal hurting hearts. That's the hope, anyway, that these creators held out as they shaped the new Sandy Hook Elementary School.

If Proverbs tells us that making the world is an act of creative communion, these architects tell us, so is remaking the world.

If our ancestors in faith tell us that even God did not attempt this work alone, our contemporaries tell us, neither should we.

This bit from Proverbs is strange - it's a place where some hints of ancient Egyptian or Babylonian goddess mythology slip into what's becoming Jewish monotheism - Woman Wisdom, God's best friend here, looks a lot like Ma'at, who is both the child of the creator God and the ordering

principle of creation, like Asherah, the goddess who gives life to all who find her. But maybe that tells us that even our scriptures are the result of a kind of communion, an old sharing, fraught at times but still laced with some respect, with some idea that maybe we can live in this creative tension, maybe we can will each other to survive.

The work of world-making is never-ending, God knows. But that also means the invitation to play is always calling out to us, always asking us: What now? What next? When the Knit Wits get together, you know, they laugh, and they create, and they also make the world a little warmer, a little gentler, a little cozier, for people they know and people they don't. When the hiking group sets out on an adventure they explore, and they play, and they also deepen their appreciation for the beauty and the diversity of the world, and they share that back in their built neighborhoods, and maybe that appreciation grows beyond them, too.

Play is its own end. It is a good unto itself. But even when we don't set out with any other goal, we are also, always, making a world. All of us, always. We are friends of God, and this is what we do when we get together. May it be so.