

**Genesis 1:1-2:4a**

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.<sup>4</sup> And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.<sup>5</sup> God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.<sup>6</sup>

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."<sup>7</sup> So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.<sup>8</sup> God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.<sup>9</sup>

And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.<sup>10</sup> God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.<sup>11</sup> Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so.<sup>12</sup> The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.<sup>13</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years,<sup>15</sup> and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so.<sup>16</sup> God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.<sup>17</sup> God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth,<sup>18</sup> to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.<sup>19</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky."<sup>21</sup> So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good.<sup>22</sup> God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."<sup>23</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so.<sup>25</sup> God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every

creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.<sup>28</sup> God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."<sup>29</sup> God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.<sup>30</sup> And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.<sup>31</sup> God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.<sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.<sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.<sup>4</sup> These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

#### **Matthew 28:16-20**

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.<sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.<sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (1000)

Authority is the power to name what's real. Authority: it is taken up, as whenever you speak what you see or hear or know to be true; and it is conferred, as when others hear you speak and recognize your words as corresponding to what's real.

Water is falling from clouds in the sky. You say, "It's raining," and others see the water falling from clouds in the sky and they say, "You're right. It's raining." That's authority, the power to name what's real. It's a sort of authorship, the writing of a world; and it's a dynamic, a two-fold movement: you take it up, and it is conferred upon you by consent.

See, otherwise, it's authoritarian. The grabbing after power that no one consents to, the exercising of power by force: see, that's not authority, that's authoritarian. It's different.

The story of God creating the world is a story of *true* authority at work, a truly powerful author writing a world—for this tells of something not merely a matter of naming what's real but of naming that things become real. When the word is realized: that is true authority. When the word speaks Being into beings, that is true authority.

Incidentally, Isaiah, the prophet, understood God as Being of such authority that God's word conferred being as well as spurred action. See, he prophesied, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, ...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." God's word: it accomplishes its purpose; it realizes its meaning. For God, speech is action. So, wherever speech is action, *there* is something of God. Wherever speech becomes action or inspires action, *there* is something of God's tremendous power.

One of the remarkable things about this creation story is in when you compare it to other creation stories of other early cultures. Most others you'd find imagine a primordial war. Many other creation stories we know of from early and tribal cultures imagine here to have a been a great battle, waged between two near co-equal forces—good and evil, order and chaos. This one, though, doesn't imagine primordial battle and doesn't imagine anything co-equal to the creative power of God. In this, God is simply true authority, and the creation is the result of divinely spoken word. Here is a peaceful process, a creative process, in which nothing is sacrificed, in which nothing is overcome by domination or killed off, not even righteously killed off that other things might live. Here is a God for whom and by whom life isn't dependent upon death, and sustenance doesn't come at another's cost, and the generative power of having an enemy against which you can define yourself fades in favor of the non-oppositional power of God, this one who is Being and who is against nothing and in whom we, each and all, live and move and have our being.

All of this means that, what makes this story wondrous isn't that it's factual (which it isn't) but that it's radical, radically different from others of its apparent kind. The people who first told this old story: they had a radical understanding of God. They imagined and experienced God as unlike anything of this world—though we can always try, right—a non-oppositional power of being? To move from non-being to being to true being: that can be what life's about, right?

So, those primitive people—maybe not so primitive?

What's more, the scriptures of our tradition critique the notion of a primordial battle that resulted in hard-won victory for orderliness. Consider, in the book of psalms, the appearance of Leviathan, a primordial monster. In other cultures, and other creation stories, Leviathan menaces and destroys. It's the sea monster from which order is wrested, the sea monster at last overcome.

But it is, in our tradition, more like a bathtub toy for God. “O Lord, how manifold are your works!” the psalmist declares. “In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.” See, this thing that might have been imagined as wielding power on par with God’s power is but sport, a plaything out for a rollicking swim, little more, at least to God.

Because this isn’t entirely to make light of the menacing force that is chaos. This isn’t to make light of the possibility of chaos, which does indeed destroy. Really, to claim that chaos is hardly equal to God’s power isn’t to deny that it it’s equal, or even superior, to our power. Chaos can overwhelm us, “overwhelm” being just the right word because “whelm” is what can happen to a vessel when it suffers a surge of water, so to overwhelm is to call on an image of flooding.

And this is, indeed, how chaos is often imagined in scripture. According to many a scripture scholar, any image of storms, rough water, or flooding in all these books of the Bible are actually allusions to the experience of chaotic violence, even mob violence. It rises up without notice. It can happen in but a moment—the sort of violence that might have resulted in the stoning of Moses in the wilderness (“They are almost ready to stone me!”) or that did result in the stoning of Stephen. (“They became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.”)

This is what’s in the creation story’s imagining a dome created to separate the waters of the sky from the waters of the earth. This dome: it is civilization, it is the good order for creaturely thriving. This is also, of course, evoked in the story of the Great Flood, which might have meant to indicate a natural disaster, or might have meant to indicate what’s needed when war and violence overtake a human group. And this is what’s meant when, in the gospels, Jesus speaks of those in the time of Noah, some being “taken up” and some being “left.” This has been co-opted to imply that the lucky ones are those who have been “taken up” as opposed to those who have been “left behind.” But the text implies something else altogether: that those who are “taken up” are as those who lose themselves in a dynamic of overwhelming violence, whereas those who are “left” are as those who retain their selves even amidst chaos and violence—and blessed are those who are *not* taken up, who don’t lose themselves to be carried away on a violent tide.

It even lurks in this creation story, as the formless void and darkened deep, where a wind swept over a face of these waters. Chaos remains potent and potential. Yet God speaks, and Being

rises from it, and creation takes hold, and good order and balance and justice provide something of greater appeal than any violent tide possibly could.

I've paid close attention to the demonstrations and protests and even riots of this past week. As you likely know, I even spent some time amidst three different ones in Boston—protests though one that teetered into something more of whelming.

Not much of an activist, nor having lived at times when activism was a potent option, I'd participated in a few marches for various causes before this, but never like this, never at times such as this, about something so pressing and arousing of so much passion. The immediacy of George Floyd's terrifying and tortured death (lynching? crucifixion?), against a backdrop of far too many unarmed Black people dying in the hands of the police, amidst the context of Minneapolis' dreadful racial injustice and the wider context of a nation with a rotten record in that regard and a legacy of slavery we've never fully atoned for or attempted to make right, all the while police forces have become increasingly militarized, which contributes to the escalation of conflict rather than its de-escalation, and have been infiltrated by white supremacists to the degree that it merited an FBI instigation under the second Bush administration whose conclusions were that this was an urgent, and nationwide, problem: these all have landed amidst a pandemic that plagues Black communities worst of all in America, and it's just too much. The individual trauma, the collective rage, the inheritance of injustice, the hobbled public health and private wealth, the current administration that couldn't make things worse for the democratic constitutional republic that we're supposed to be than they already do if that were their express agenda (and one wonders if it is): it's all just too much.

On Sunday night, when the march I attended with Tobias and his friend Teagan in Boston had reached its goal of the State House and the Boston Common, and when night had suddenly fallen, over the course of about twenty minutes the event went from something that would have the kids and me lying on the soft grass of the Common, I still in my clerical robe which I'd worn all afternoon and evening, while countless other clumps of people also relaxed across the wide distance, to being one in which lines of police officers in riot gear circumscribed us, advancing ten feet at a time as if to take ground.

We three had decided to head home, our car in a nearby garage down Tremont Street. But, as we headed down the slope toward the Park Street Church, people were pouring out of the Park

Square T stop, the trains apparently stopped running for the night, though without any forewarning; and the crowd on that street corner swelled. To our left, a half a block away, between us and the garage we needed to reach, a police car was on fire. To our right, a line of officers was advancing. Fireworks in the sky had me in mind of a celebration, but freelance fireworks aren't legal in Massachusetts, something that only occurred to me days later.

The first person to throw a plastic water bottle from the crowd into a police line was met with admonition, a voice of would-be authority: "No! We're not doing that." But by that point, there was no social means by which collectively to consent to that voice of authority. A few minutes later, a second plastic bottle came. Eventually, a third, none that would hurt, neither the armored police nor any protestor, though could startle the latter and provoke the former.

Moving past the T Stop, down Tremont Street a little, the crowd was thinner. But a police line was advancing, and did at one point nearly push me off where I was standing. This is something that's never happened to me. "Mom, get back," Tobias hollered to me. "Why? I can stand here," I said, slow to get with what was happening very quickly. "You can't," he explained. "They're taking the ground. That's how they do it."

When we reached an impasse, I was nearly face to face with a line of officers. We studied one another, a line of thirty or so protestors and a line of twenty or so police officers, one of which was wearing a gas mask and apparently conveying strategy to the line of officers. Someone down the line from me, a young Black woman, suggested more than ordered, "Take a knee!" as if we were all feeling a little awkward, or maybe needed something to do to ease the tension. "Take a knee," which she did, and which those around her did as well.

I eventually joined them on a knee myself, though I'll admit I gave it some thought. I don't like conforming to such things without probing as to why. Why am I doing this?

Attention then turned to the police. "Take a knee with us," the young woman said. "Take a knee."

We watched them, mostly white though one Black man (who was taking a lot of taunts from a Black boy who ran up and eventually went away). We watched them, mostly middle-aged, though one young-ish woman, but all of a group. Their names and badge numbers were in plain sight, but otherwise they were much very a group, indistinguishable from one another.

I surveyed them, so under armor, and I wondered, did they want to be in this position? Is this why they joined the police? And which among them was a white nationalist, because if the (though ignored) urgency of that now fifteen-year old report is to be believed, someone among this line was.

“Take a knee.” This woman had become surer of her request. And I was reminded of something I preached a while ago. “Join us down here,” was the line. It was imagined to be said to the billionaires out there who are working so hard, and bending so many laws, to protect their own interests. “Join us down here, in public parks and public schools, our busy public beaches and pools. We’re having a lot of fun,” I told the likes of Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg, just in case they were listening. Now I was literally *down*, and I’ll admit it was uncomfortable. One knee is hardly fit for holding a whole body’s weight. Imagine doing it for *eight minutes*.

We watched each other.

We waited, and they dug their heels in, and bolstered their shoulder-to-shoulder, and readied once again their Billy clubs.

We gave up.

When we were back on our feet, and Tobias and I were nearly shoulder to shoulder, a boy, Black, about his age slipped between us, apparently to approach an officer. He threw a plastic bottle in a white officer’s shielded face, who was now quick with pepper spray. It got the boy square on, and he fell at my feet. It got Tobias and Tegan, too, but just secondarily. And I wondered later, did that boy chose us as the place to make his move? Would the fact of us—our whiteness, my clergy-ness—slow the police down for retaliation?

When I reached down for the boy, I did so knowing, with no small amount of shame, that this is one of the very few Black people I’ve touched in my life. I reached for his head and face, wanted to see that he wasn’t injured, but two friends of his came and helped him away.

Now, though, the police were on the move, the impasse broken. It all resembled strikingly the so-called Boston Massacre, which took place some two blocks away and 250 years and two months ago. British soldiers squared off with a mob of Bostonians when a boy threw a snowball into the mix, which got the soldiers shooting—a catalytic event of world-historic proportion.

So, here’s the thing: all this time, amidst all this confusion, where no word of authority could be uttered or heard except that one woman’s word that got us on our knees, an authority to

which though the police would not bow or bend, I did aim to keep close to Jesus. I feel shy to say that, but it's true. I aimed to stay close to Jesus as I've come to sense him to be, for he, after all, is the one who has demonstrated how to walk on the water that might otherwise overwhelm and to calm storms that might otherwise thoroughly engulf. Because that's what those miracle stories indicate—not that Jesus had magical power, but that Jesus manifest the power of God to create order of lurking chaos, that he manifest God's authority, which creates order, and which is different from the order made of the authoritarian.

What makes for the difference, of course, is love. True authority: it comes of a vision and discernment drenched in love. That's what the request to take a knee is about: not to give up your ground, not to surrender your power, but to look upon these traumatized, outraged, frightened, overwhelmed people with some love.

In order for a word to match reality, it must come profuse with love.

In order for a word to match reality in such a way that others confirm it (“Yes.”), consent to is, (“Yes, that's right. You understand.”) it must come profuse with love.

For all this, I was slow to react to another reality, the one all around me that, though Jesus does have the power to calm, I don't. By now glass bottles were flying, smashing on the ground, broken glass ricocheting up. “Mom,” Tobias called me, as he ran from the street. “Let's go. It could cut your eyes.” Then from the officer, “You better get away from us. They're throwing those at us, and if you stand near us, you'll get hit. I don't care if you get hurt,” he said, “but you might care.”

The night had only just fallen, maybe an hour earlier. It wasn't going to let up any time soon, and there was little reason to think this event would rise back to its previous heights—at least not tonight. We made our way to the locked-down parking garage, ushered through by security, though always at that safe distance—first an older Southeast Asian man who didn't speak English, then an older white man with an Eastern European accent, finally a young brown man—with no accent, he was from here—who showed me how to use the payment kiosk through the plexiglass window.

“How is it out there?” he asked.

“Just, be safe,” I told him.

Driving out of the city, we passed glass store fronts that had been shattered, a Walgreens that was in rough shape.



I had two hours of driving across the night to wonder if we'd done the right thing in going, the right thing in staying for as long as we did or the right thing in leaving—the fact that we could a privilege denied many people there. Or maybe we should have made our escape earlier, back before night fell, when it was still all good feeling and the appearance of good order.

What had we contributed to, and what had we contributed?

I still don't know. But an article I came across two days ago on the WBGH website painted the picture from an authoritative stance, its headline, "How a Day of Peaceful Protest Turned to Hours of Unrest in Boston." It was a relief to read, a view from all sides. See, that's what the truth can do, clarify and pacify and establish common ground from which to start the building up of a creative and good order. But it can only come from the truth, and that can only come profuse with empathy, compassion, love.

When the risen Christ urged upon his disciples that they go out to all nations and baptize all people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, a directive that comes of all authority in heaven and on earth resting on him, he meant not that Christians should now impose a new religion upon all people. He meant instead that the authority which comes of love might rest and rise among all people, might even be felt as a relief to all people—that there is indeed an authority to which to appeal and by which to build up good and just order, life-sustaining order. And it leaves no one out. And it comes at cost to no one. And it founds itself on no one's death or degradation or exploitation or dehumanization but is instead for the purpose of all life abounding in beauty and joy, every story told in such a way that they're recognized as right and consented to as true.

Black lives matter. To say this is to say something so basic, though a thing also that nonetheless apparently needs to be said. In this grand scheme of creative good order, Black lives matter—their individual current experiences, vast and varied as they are, and also their common experience of persistent, menacing, lurking, pointed racism. It is *all the time*. It doesn't let up. It's in individual attitudes. It's studded into public policy. And whiteness, this terrible power and self-blinding privilege, lurks like the darkened deep, ever threatening to undo what Black America builds up, ever threatening to reduce once again Black America to zero.

A Black woman I heard interviewed on a podcast this week: “There’s nothing scarier than scared white people.” Another voice from another post: “It’s a good thing for white people that Black people don’t want vengeance, we just want justice.” And maybe now’s the time.

Thanks be to God.