

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**Genesis 1: 1-2:4a**  
**“Come to the Waters! Chaos, Creation, and Creativity”**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**June 14, 2015**

Water.

It can move mountains. It can build cities and destroy them.

It has brought people together since the beginning of time, and it has the power to keep people apart.

Water.

It takes a giant wall of a dam to hold it back, and it can be held by a human hand.

During a flash flood, it runs faster than Usain Bolt, and yet for millions of people it runs out far too soon.

Water.

It is the one thing that no one can live without, be they rich, poor, young, old, or living anywhere under the sun.

It is 70 percent of the planet, and yet for 748 million people, it is still hard to find. (1)

Water.

When the writer of Genesis 1 told the story of creation—or maybe it would be truer to call it not only a story, but liturgy, with a rabbi telling, maybe even acting out, the story parts and the congregation responding like congregations do even today, like we have done in today’s Call to Worship, “And God saw that it was good. And it was evening and there was morning, the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth day”—he described water. It was chaotic water, and it was the stuff from which everything else was created. “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.”

So, before creation even, before light, before the separation of time into day and night, there was water.

And it was on the second day that God said, “let there be a dome (older translations call it a “firmament”) in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.”

Luther College professor, Karla Suomala describes the second day of creation as God’s blowing a bubble in the midst of the watery chaos. Within ancient Hebrew cosmology, the goal of life is to keep the watery chaos at bay, surrounding but not piercing the bubble. This was God’s job; only God allowed the waters from above and the waters from below into the bubble by punching holes in the top of the bubble when needed for rain or in the bottom of the bubble for rivers.

However, Suomala suggests that the word that is translated “dome” or “firmament” (*rakia*) can just as easily be translated as “expanse.” Translating the word as “Expanse” Suomala says, can imply a less solid, a more porous boundary between life on earth and the watery chaos beyond.

It is an intriguing and a compelling observation, I think.

Expanding the definition of the words and phrases that the writer of Genesis uses can enable us to explore more deeply the connection between chaos and creation in theologically significant ways.

For most of us, chaos has negative connotations. We are constantly seeking ways, both individually and communally, to avoid, escape, or manage chaos. We tend to think of chaos as a problem for which solutions involving order and structure must be found.

But what if we were to move toward adopting an understanding of the second day of creation and God’s separation of the waters not by imaging a metaphorical dome but by imagining a metaphorical expanse, and thus to think of life and chaos in a more symbiotic relationship, part of the same fabric of creation living in relationship with that which we cannot control? What if we were to use our God-given gift of creativity—our creativity not only in art, but in relationships, in scientific exploration, in our political will, in our entrepreneurial spirit-- not to fight chaos with every fiber of our being, but rather to embrace it as a means by which God draws us to our best selves, as individuals, as communities, as a church, as a global, even a universal, village? (2)

I offer the story of none other than Michael J. Fox as an example of what it can look like.

I encountered Michael J. Fox’s story in the book *Blue Mind: The Surprising Science That Shows How Being Near, In, On, or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More Connected, and Better At What You Do*. I was

skeptical of the most immodest subtitle, I'll admit, but the book lives up to its braggadocio of a subtitle, or maybe I just think so because I read it the week before last as I sat on the balcony overlooking Cherry Grove Beach.

In any case, here is what happened on December 31, 1999, the last day of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Michael J. Fox and his family were in the U.S. Virgin Islands for the holiday, and he had an encounter with a sea turtle that changed the direction of his life.

"As the turtle and I swam together in disjointed tandem, the turtle trying to ignore me and me trying to pose no threat, I thought of all those documentaries I had watched as a kid: thousands of hatchling baby sea turtles making their way toward the safety of the ocean while seabirds dive-bomb, picking them off one by one. Only a handful will survive. And that's just the beginning of a turtle's ordeal. I noticed that this one was missing a sizable chunk of the rear flipper on his left side. How old was this guy? I wondered. An adult, obviously. What wars had he been through?" (3)

Something in that encounter caused Fox to walk out of the water, up to his wife, Tracy, who was sitting on the beach, and tell her that he was leaving his hit TV show, *Spin City*, at the end of the season. It seems that 'all my epiphanies come to me at or near a beach,' he wrote later.

What he did after he left *Spin City*, we all know, is to launch the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, becoming the world's most tireless fundraiser and advocate in the search for a cure for Parkinson's.

Talk about embracing the chaos! Talk about living in relationship with something that one cannot control and using one's God given gift of creativity to that end!

Wallace J. Nichols, the author of *Blue Mind*, reflects, "I believe that I know how Michael J. Fox felt on that beach. Having spent my life around water and its creature, I can testify that something mystical can happen to the mind and heart when we intersect with nature. Humans are surrounded by man-made buildings, objects, and environments, and it can become harder and harder to remember our intimate relationship with this beautiful blue planet. But magic can happen in the fleeting moments in which we notice the natural world—the sunset that causes us to catch our breath, the murmur of wind rustling through the trees, the sharp, clean smell of rain on grass or the tang of salty air near a shore, the feel of sand or dirt underfoot. These moments reconnect us not only to nature, but to our *own* nature; they carry with them the recognition that we are part of something bigger than ourselves." (4)

Precisely, the writer of Genesis 1 would say. Precisely. We are a part of something bigger than ourselves, and this something bigger, more often than not, involves challenge, pain, change, messiness, chaos. In the midst of it all, here we are, created by God in God's own image. In the midst of it all, God aims to bring us to our very best selves, not for our own sake, but for the sake of our neighbors, be they human, plant, animal, or anything else in all creation.

I look forward to coming to the waters with you each Sunday this summer. I look forward to the wonder, the surprise, the refreshment, the renewal that God will give to us as we explore together a few of those 800 biblical references to water.

1. "I Am Water," [www.charitywater.org](http://www.charitywater.org).
2. Karla Suomala, "Commentary on Genesis 1:1-2:4a," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), September 8, 2013.
3. Michael J. Fox, *Lucky Man: A Memoir* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), 242-243. Quoted by Wallace J. Nichols in *Blue Mind: The Surprising Science that Shows How Being Near, In, On, or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More Connected, and Better at What You Do* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2014), 182.
4. Nichols, 183-184.