

## **STORIES CREATE OUR LANDSCAPES OF MEANING**

Sermon – Sept. 27, 2026, Hillsboro UCC, by Rev. Paul Graves

Genesis 1: 1-13

### **Introduction**

“This morning’s reading from the Genesis creation story is the first of countless wonderful and wild stories we read in this library of books called the Bible. It simply and effectively illustrates the power of stories to help shape our worldviews – in this case, the world we never knew but continue to benefit from and learn from. During Paul’s message, he will share one of Jesus’ parables, again to illustrate the power of stories whose meanings are both universal but also fingerprint unique.”

### **Witness of Ancient Wisdom**

#### **Genesis 1: 1-13 (The Poverty and Justice Bible – Contemporary English Version)**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was barren, with no form of life. It was under a roaring ocean covered in darkness. But the spirit of God was moving over the waters. God said, ‘I command light to shine!’ And light started shining. God looked at the light and saw that it was good. He separated light from darkness and named the light ‘Day’ and the darkness ‘Night’. Evening came and then morning – this was the first day. God made the dome and called it ‘Sky’. Evening came and then morning – that was the second day. God said, ‘I command the water under the sky to come together in one place, so there will be dry ground. And that’s what happened. God named the dry ground ‘Land’, and he named the water ‘Sea.’ God looked at what he had done and saw that it was good. God (then) said, ‘I command the earth to produce all kinds of plants, including fruit, trees and grain. And that’s what happened. The earth produced all kinds of vegetation. God looked at what he had done, and it was all good. Evening came and then morning – that was the third day.

### **Witness of Modern Wisdom:**

## The Story – A Comment by Steve Garnass-Holmes

“God creates, liberates, and leads us toward a new world. That’s the story of the Bible in a nutshell. God is always doing this three-fold thing. God is always creating, bringing reality into existence. This means creating stars and setting evolution on its course, and it also means creating us, as every moment we are born anew. God is always liberating us from what binds us, whether that’s social injustice or personal fears, habits and attachments. And God is always accompanying us toward the new world—the Promised Land, the Realm of God, the New Jerusalem—the future God has in store for us that God is still creating. God’s story never ends with “The End.” Or even “happily ever after.” It always ends with “And then...”

God is still speaking, **and we are still listening. Thanks be to God!**

Preparing for today, I decided to play a bit with AI. So I asked: *How many experiences and stories about those experiences have we had over our lifetimes?* I chose 80 as an arbitrary age-limit, and started at 5 years old – 75 years of stories. Those of you who aren’t 80 yet, listen carefully anyway – your time is coming!

An 80-year-old has experienced or told an estimated **27,000 to 137,000 stories** over a span of 75 years. An 80-year-old person has likely experienced between **200,000 to over 500,000 distinct life events** capable of being told as a story. A typical 80-year-old possesses a core bank of **200 to 500 major life stories**.

I found it thoughtful and likely on-target that AI also suggests there is a core set of about 10 deeply meaningful, repeated anchor stories we share with loved ones. **10 central stories** that we repeat to our children and grandchildren, friends and family who are willing to listen time and again! These stories are repeated because they serve a specific social function: the transmission of core family values, resilience, and lessons.

My sermon title is inspired by an image planted in my imagination by Father Henri Nouwen over 30 years ago, about stories being the landscapes we travel that give our lives meaning. Literal landscapes sometimes provoke meaningful life-long stories. Sometimes not so much.

These 4 very different landscapes may illustrate what I mean. As you look at the landscapes on the screen, let them tickle your minds and imaginations to those life-landscapes you’ve traveled, and the stories of meaning you bring back with you.

So I simply want to share some stories with you to remind you how our landscape stories, including our church stories, are both shaped by forces outside of us, and by our deeply important inner responses to what we experience. And to remind us that however we experience a “happening”, or tell its story to others, we can be both aware and grateful that God is present in expected – and unexpected – ways in those stories.

A few weeks ago, on 9/11, I read a powerful story by a woman I know through our common writing connections in Spokane. Gretchen Rehberg is currently the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Spokane. In this photo, she attended the 2026 9/11 ceremony in Cashmere, WA, where she served her first parish, just out of seminary.

On 9/11/01, Gretchen was a seminary student in NYC. Before seminary, she spent 14 years as a chemistry professor, plus she was a volunteer firefighter, an EMT and a Hazmat responder. Because of that prior experience, she became involved in first-responder tasks.

One year later, 2002, she began having breathing issues, and was diagnosed with asthma. In 2012 she discovered she didn't have asthma but pulmonary fibrosis. It took another 14 years before doctors found a donor so Gretchen could have a double-lung transplant in March 2026.

Today, she is still recovering, but is healthy of body and spirit. I have a copy of her story if you would like to see it. Her story is filled with deep grief, hope, anger, frustration, and hope again. Her stories before and after 9/11 are very powerful! Great meaning to Gretchen and those she has touched over the years.

The Bible is obviously filled with our spiritual history, mostly share through so many stories. I'd like to recall a few to our attention. A few minutes ago, Mary re-told us the story of Creation's first 3 days.

So I invite you to live in your imagination with this photo for a short time. What do you see beyond the painting that gives meaning to your affirmation of Creation? Remember that after creating what we experience as home, God declared these acts good. Oh, the stories that this provocative Creation story has birthed.

Richard Rohr's identifying our biblical creation story as myth is not sacrilegious, or incorrect. It simply affirms that our story is part of a larger story of Creation told in many, meaningful ways. In a few minutes I'll also share a Native American creation story to illustrate this truth-piece.

A 2<sup>nd</sup> reminder of biblical stories' landscapes comes from one of Jesus' parables. Matt. 13:1-9 shares this familiar story:

Matthew 13:1-9 (The Poverty and Justice Bible – Contemporary English Version)

*That same day Jesus left the house and went out beside Lake Galilee, where he sat down to teach. Such large crowds gathered around him that he had to sit in a boat, while the people sat on the shore. Then he taught them many things by telling stories.*

*He said: A farmer went out to scatter seed in a field. While the farmer was scattering the*

*seed, some of it fell along the road and was eaten by the birds. Other seeds fell on thin, rocky ground and quickly started growing because the soil wasn't very deep. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and dried up, because they didn't have enough roots.*

*Some other seeds fell where thorn bushes grew up and choked the seeds. But a few seeds did fall on good ground where the plants produced a hundred or 60 or 30 times as much as was scattered. If you have ears, pay attention!*

Each time we hear this story, we also hear Jesus' cautious challenge to "pay attention". There is also something in this story (as in all parables) that we'll miss if we don't pay attention – not simply to the words of the story, but also to the subtle heart-and-head meanings the words only point to. All stories, biblical or personal or social, are landscapes of meanings we do well to travel with focused attention.

Now, I'd like us to pivot our attention to the power of story as it is represented in Native American mythology and spirituality. The First American Museum in Oklahoma City is an incredible collection of mythologies and contemporary human stories.

They were brought into this building by 39 indigenous tribes that call Oklahoma home. Sue and I first visited it 2 years ago. As it happens, we will see it again in 2 weeks as we visit seminary friends who live in OKC. Some stories are centuries old. Others, decades old. Still others, very current. All have traveled turbulent landscapes of meaning.

Our first story is a Creation Myth from what used to be called the Iroquois Confederacy, located in northeast North America. It's now identified as (HOH-din-oh-SHOH-nee) The Haudenosaunee Confederacy. I apologize if I mis-pronounced that tribal word. I also apologize in advance because in the interest of time, I have shortened the myth. But I believe I maintained its full spirit.

Listen carefully for the turtle image in the story. It's a briefly mentioned, but pivotal character, in the myth. Plus, one of the intriguing features of this story is how the creation of the Good Spirit and Evil Spirit are also key elements.

*"Long, long ago, the earth was deep beneath the water. There was a great darkness because no sun or moon or stars shone. The only creatures living in this dark world were water animals such as the beaver, muskrat, duck and loon.*

*Far above the water-covered earth was the Land of the Happy Spirits, where the Great Spirit dwelled. In the center of this upper realm was a giant apple tree with roots that sank deep into the ground.*

*One day the Great Spirit pulled the tree up from its roots creating a pit in the ground. The Great Spirit called to his daughter, who lived in the Upper World. He commanded her to look into the pit. The woman did as she was told and peered through the hole. In the distance, she saw the Lower World covered by water and clouds.*

*The Great Spirit spoke to his daughter, telling her to go into the world of darkness. He then tenderly picked her up and dropped her into the hole. The woman – called Sky Woman by those watching her fall – began to slowly float downward.*

*As Sky Woman continued her descent, the water animals looked up. Far above them they saw a great light that was Sky Woman. The animals were initially afraid because of the light emanating from her. In their fear, they dove beneath the water.*

*The animals eventually conquered their fear and came back up to the surface. Now they were concerned about the woman, and what would happen to her when she reached the water.*

*The water animals summoned a great turtle and patted the earth upon its back. At once the turtle grew and grew, as did the amount of earth. This earth became North America, a great island.*

*Soon after her arrival, Sky Woman gave birth to twins. The first born became known as the Good Spirit. The other twin caused his mother so much pain that she died during his birth. He was to be known as the Evil Spirit.*

*The Good Spirit took his mother's head and hung it in the sky, and it became the sun. The Good Spirit also fashioned the stars and moon from his mother's body. He buried the remaining parts of Sky Woman under the earth. Thus, living things may always find nourishment from the soil, for it springs from Mother Earth.*

*While the Good Spirit provided light, the Evil Spirit created the darkness. The Good Spirit created many things, but each time his brother would attempt to undo his good work.*

*Everything the Good Spirit made, his wicked brother attempted to destroy.*

*After the Good Spirit completed the earth, he created man out of red clay. Placing the man upon the earth, the Good Spirit instructed the man about how he should live. The Evil Spirit made a monkey from sea foam.*

*Upon completion of his work, the Good Spirit bestowed a protecting spirit upon all of his creations. This done, he called his brother and told him he must cease making trouble. The Evil Spirit emphatically refused.*

*The Good Spirit became enraged at his brother's wickedness. He challenged his evil twin to combat. The winner would become the ruler of the world. For their weapons they used the thorns of the giant apple tree. The battle raged for many days.*

*The Good Spirit triumphed, overcoming his evil brother. The Good Spirit took his place as ruler of the earth and banished his brother to a dark cave under the ground. In this cave the Evil Spirit was to remain.*

*The Evil Spirit, however, has wicked servants who do his bidding and roam upon the earth. The wicked spirits are able to take any form and cause men to do evil things.*

*This is the reason that everyone has both a good heart and a bad heart. Regardless of how good a man is, he still possesses some evil. The reverse also is true. For however evil a man may be, he still has some good qualities. No man is perfect.*

*The Good Spirit continues to create and protect mankind. It is the Good Spirit who controls the spirits of good men upon their death. His wicked brother takes possession of the souls of those who are evil like himself. And so it remains.*

The 2<sup>nd</sup> story is a more contemporary application of the Iroquois Creation story. It shows how we choose to deal with Good and Evil. You may have heard it before:

*“One evening an old Cherokee Indian told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, ‘My son, the battle is between two ‘wolves’ inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.*

*The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.’*

*The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: ‘Which wolf wins?’*

*The old Cherokee simply replied, ‘The one you feed.’”*

This story simply reminds us – we have a choice. Feed the Good Wolf and it will show up in our character, habits and behavior positively. Or feed the Evil Wolf and our whole world will turn negative: like poison, this will slowly eat away at our soul. The crucial question is “Which are you feeding today”?

This seems like a good question upon which we’ll end this little journey through our storied landscapes of meaning. Our stories abound all around us, within us, and between us. Our stories – and God’s stories – continue.

I leave you with the punch-line of our modern wisdom quote today from Steve Garnass-Holmes: “God’s story never ends with “The End.” Or even “happily ever after.” It always ends with **“And then...”**

Our stories would do well to end the same way...”And then...” So let your stories end the same way!