

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 14 OCTOBER 2012

Baptism of Angus Alexander Jiaxian Gan

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Genesis 1, Psalm 33: 1-11, Romans 8: 18-30

“Like a mother hen”

Last week we talked about how the principal, first, way God is portrayed in scripture, is as Creator. A creator who, from the beginning, creates according to principles that will later be recognised in the life and ministry of Jesus by those who follow him. God’s creating consists of separating heaven and earth, light and darkness, water and land, water and water, life and life. What we are presented with in Genesis one is an ordering of God from whom life emanates in forever larger and more intricate circles.

The earth, after it is created, is *tohuwabohu*, a formless void, an empty formlessness, a great confusion. *Tohu* meaning empty and *bohu* meaning formless, without boundary, or confused, in hebrew. (*va* means and). There is nothing, no sea, no land, no trees, no birds, no fish, no animals, nothing. And neither are there monsters, or other gods competing for dominance as was portrayed in the creation stories of some of the other religions that were around at the time. To start with the earth is formless and empty, waiting to be formed, waiting to be filled, waiting to receive shape and definition.

Empty, but not entirely though. According to the rabbis that is. They tell us that when we consider the language used carefully, the emptiness is not entirely empty, the void not entirely without form. *Bohu* the rabbis say, can be divided into ‘bo’ and ‘hu’, which means ‘in it’ and ‘he’. That would mean it can not only be translated as ‘formless’, but also as ‘He is in it’, and you can probably guess who ‘He’ would be. He’s already in it! What? Who? He, God, or the essence of what God is, the principal, God’s Word, as John calls it in the first chapter of his gospel. Waiting to take shape, waiting to incarnate in the world.

Over this formless void, with the essence, the seed of God already inside it, hovers the *Ruach*, the Spirit or Wind of God.

Now this again takes a little Hebrew to understand. First of all: It seems God is in two places at once. While God's essence lies dormant in the formless void, God's ruach, at the same time God's breath hovers, broods over that same formless void. And think a bit further and you'' '' there are three manifestations of God at work here already, in verse of scripture. God the creator who creates the formless void, God the Word, or the essence of life, who lies dormant in the void, waiting to be called to fill and form the empty confusion of earth, and God the Spirit hovering over the deep.



The two words hovering and Spirit play around with the root Cheth, life. The hebrew letter Cheth is a combination of the two previous letters in the Hebrew alphabeth, the vav and the zayin, connected by a bridge, that hovers over the two other letters as the rabbis say 'touching without touching them'. This bridge is called a chatoret, a word that means summit, or chupa, which means covering. Together making the letter Cheth look like a bridge or a gate.

The rabbis attach deep meaning to this. They say the letter Cheth symbolises God (the chatoret) bridging, crowning, the vav and the zayin, two letters that stand for father and mother. In God father and mother are united, brought under one roof, one covering, together they form the gate to life. Not just any life, but the essence of life forming and transforming in creation.

The hovering of God the Spirit over creation is the hovering of an eagle feeding her young, hovering over the nest for fear of crushing her young should she put her full weight on them or on the nest. Protecting and feeding them at the same time. What a marvelous image of God! Forming the gate to life together with the male and female parts of humanity, hovering, touching, but not touching, present in everything that is to be created from the void, a roof, a covering, brooding life into existence.

Ruach Rachaf, you can hear how the ch, the chet, even if you don't know any Hebrew determines the sound of those two words. Life, life, life, singing an excitement and expectation through these words that make us look forward to what will be coming next.

The Spirit, the wind, the breath of God, hovering, fluttering. But not just hovering, fluttering, touching without touching, carefully nurturing the young creation. The word Rachaf is also used to describe the brooding of a chicken over her eggs, something that implies active inactivity for the sake of life, for the sake of birthing something into being. In this sense the void becomes a womb, with the essence of God floating around in it, waiting to be shaped and grow into something that, at the end of the chapter, will be called very good.

Paul in Romans 8, like a good rabbinic student, picks up this imagery when he speaks about creation as waiting and groaning in pains of childbirth. The life God has begun calling into being has still not completely “formed” or incarnated. The essence of God, part of creation from the beginning, has still not fully developed, has still not come to fullness of being. Creation, Paul says, was pre-destined to be something, it at this stage, is clearly not yet. Pre-destined to conform to the life we have seen taking shape in Jesus. Pre-destined to be, walk, talk, breathe like him in every way. All of creation, all of us, pre-destined, called, to a Jesus' like life.

Pre-destination is not, what some later interpretations made it to be, a pre-destination, a pre-selection of some against others for glory, but a pre-destining on God's behalf, of all creation, to be formed by the Ruach, the Spirit, in the image of the living Word. An image that has become fully incarnate for the first time in the life of Jesus Christ. A process that is ongoing, growing in the womb of the void, touched and not touched by God, brooded over and nurtured by God, held together and connected by God, forming a gate to life in all its fullness.

Genesis one tells about the principles of how that process works. With creation home grown by God, seeded into the void and brooded over by the Spirit, light starts to separate from darkness, day from night, land from

water, water from water, and is populated by weird and wonderful creatures in every shape and form imaginable. God is portrayed as present in this process, present as a moving, active, entity that is at the beginning of it, around it, over it, and in it, working, loving, nurturing, coaxing, brooding life into existence. Moving earth from formless emptiness to abundance of life, beauty, love, justice, peace and right relationship.

We play out that whole cosmic drama every time we bring someone to the font to be baptised. The tohuwabohu, the formless void filled with the waters of the deep the Spirit hovers over, represented in the baptismal font of our Church with the lid that is so beautifully adorned with the symbol of the Spirit descending. As we take off the lid we symbolically open that void, the deep, and sprinkle a little bit of it on the children we baptise as a sign that they have come from that void, and that their lives, to a certain extent, are still part of it, waiting to be formed, to grow into the creation God intended, the creation God pre-destined them to become.

Waiting to grow into the image of Christ and rise from the void, from the emptiness and confusion that reigns creation before God starts filling it with life and light. Waiting for the Spirit to descend and hover, touching and not touching, brooding, fluttering, like a new life flutters in the womb, waiting to become, waiting to take shape, waiting to grow into something more defined. Creatures where the seed that was sown from the beginning, will start to find its form in somebody who will be able to live out God's intentions, give shape to the Word, be true to the principles of love and light, to the essence of the divine as it has been woven into the fabric of the world from the start.

We celebrate today that we know Angus to be pre-destined by God to grow into somebody that reflects the image of God in Christ more and more. In whom the essence of God is at work, longing to take shape. We celebrate that we believe that God hovers over Angus, like God has hovered over all creation from the start, touching and not touching, forming a bridge, offering a gateway to fullness of life.

But not only Angus, today we remember our own baptism, our own being called and pre-destined to growth in the image of God, the essence of God

woven into the fabric of our being from the start, part of a creation longing to come to fullness of being in God's name, to love, to light, to peace, to wholeness. Amen.