We sometimes talk about God’s “plan,” God’s vision for creation. It is a frequent theme of Scripture, especially the prophets. They point us toward a new and better future, the fulfillment of God’s promises. We hear it referred to as “the Day of the Lord,” and “the kingdom of God.” That plan gives us hope in times of hardship and suffering; hope that though things may be hard now, better times are ahead. During Advent, as we wait patiently for and look forward to the coming of Christmas, we also school ourselves to wait patiently for and look forward to the fruition of this plan.

This plan of God’s is a continuation of the work of creation. In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, God created all things good; and ever since the fall, we have been working our way back to good, with God always trying to figure out how to get us there. At least, that’s how the story often has been told. Today, reading these few verses of the beginning of that powerful story, I’m not so sure that’s what we’re meant to take away from it.

You see, as I read these words, I don’t hear about a God who has a coherent vision and then brings it into existence. Instead, I see a God who is curious, experimental, even playful. In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. A wind from God, swept over the face of the waters; or maybe it brooded over the waters, like a hen brooding over her nest. Of course, since neither hens nor nests had yet been conceived, who’s to say? That wind from God is really something. In Hebrew, the same word that means ‘wind’ also means ‘breath,’ as in the wind that comes from your mouth or nose. And, of course, that breath is a sure sign that someone is alive, and so that word ‘breath’ also means ‘spirit,’ or the thing that gives a person life. And so, this wind-breath-spirit of God—one might call it a Holy Wind-Breath-Spirit—broods over the waters, wondering what to do next. Then something amazing happens: God imagines a thing that is unimaginable.

When we imagine things, we extrapolate from what we know, right? Like a unicorn is a horse with a horn, or a dragon is a big lizard that breathes fire. In order to know what those things are, you have to already have a point of reference for horses, horns, lizards, and fire. But none of those things exist now. There are only three things that exist: dark, water, and God—until God imagines a fourth thing: light. You can almost hear God wondering, “huh, I wonder what Light would be like…” and then there was light, and God saw the light and said, “Wow! That’s neat! I think I’ll keep it!”

The whole story progresses in this way, with God continuing to try new things: “How about a giant dome of sky? What about Land? Wouldn’t birds be something?” And each time a new thing comes into being, God says, “Hey, that’s pretty good, I think I’ll keep it.” And throughout this whole process, God never calls those first things—the darkness and the limitless water—bad. They are frightening, and they are powerful, but God makes room for them in what God is doing.

Sometimes creation is not about having a set plan in mind for what will happen, but simply experimenting, even playing. Sometimes the most exciting acts of creation are the ones that are the most surprising. Isaac Asimov wrote, “The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not ‘Eureka!’ but, ‘That’s funny…’”

Let me show you what I mean. I’m not going to say anything else, I’m just going to invite you to watch.

(You can see this video at our YouTube channel, or by typing this link into your internet: https://bit.ly/3q2Fhfj)

This kind of art is called flow painting. I started with some idea of what I wanted to end up with when I picked the colors, but after that, the result was completely out of my hands. The picture was going to be what it was going to be; and whether or not it ended up as I expected, it came out good. I wonder if creation is a little like that. What if what makes a thing ‘good’ or not is not whether it conforms with what God thinks it should be, but whether or not God likes it… and God not only likes but loves what God creates, because love is the driving force behind God’s creation.

Think about how proud children are when they complete a picture jammed with all sorts of crudely drawn shapes and clashing colors; the beauty is not in the objective quality or in how closely it resembles reality, but in the work that went into it.

We see this again in the story from St. Mark’s gospel account. When Jesus rises up out of the water, he hears the voice of God declaring him beloved, saying that God is well pleased with him. He hears God saying that he is good. It’s not because of what he has done or where he has come from, but because of who he is—and who he is, Mark tells us, is God’s Son; that is the identity affirmed in his baptism.

If God doesn’t have a definite plan for how creation is supposed to turn out, it might just be the same for us. Maybe God doesn’t have a plan for how we are supposed to live our lives or which decisions we should make. Maybe God doesn’t actually care that much, because far more important than what we do or how we act is who we are; and who we are in baptism is beloved children of God.

Of course, I can’t imagine that God is pleased when God’s children hate and condemn one another, and I can’t imagine that God is especially happy when God’s children destroy or exploit one another or other elements of God’s creation. But I *can* imagine that, like the random swirls of the paint, or those little areas that look washed out or boring, even our evil actions still contribute to the whole picture of creation; that just like the darkness and the threatening primordial deep, God chooses to make room in creation for those things because God loves it all—the light and the dark alike. Because God loves creation so deeply, God chooses not to violate it by asserting control over it. God chooses to let creation become what it will be—but that doesn’t mean that God isn’t always working to nurture what is good, what is beautiful, what is life-affirming.

We prayed with Isaiah at the beginning of Advent, “O that you would rend the heavens and come down!” Remember that? That is exactly what has happened in this story. At Jesus’ baptism, the heavens were rent, and the Son of God stood among us. Jesus is God’s redemptive action in the world. He doesn’t come with a flaming sword in hand, smiting the wicked from atop a white horse. He comes as one unknown, and he works with a light hand. The bruised reed he does not break, and the dimly burning wick he does not quench. He teaches us that the work of bringing about God’s kingdom is not conquest, but creation.

In baptism, we are that new creation; we are the world that God is growing. We are the body of Christ, the sons and daughters and offspring of God, siblings of Jesus sharing in his work.