

The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 reflect the ancient belief that all things are composed of some combination of fire, water, air, and earth. Much more than simply building blocks, however, these four elements were believed to control the very nature of human beings and all matter. In fact, so important were these four elements believed to be, that they laid the base for alchemy and medicine until the 17th century.

Genesis 1 mentions all four elements, but says that before the creation there was no earth and no fire; there was only air and water. *The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters* (v. 1-2). Earth and fire are missing; but God's Spirit (wind) is moving over the waters, bringing into being earth and fire.

Genesis 2, the second story of creation, again mentions the four elements: *Streams came up from the Earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living soul* (v. 6-7). As the streams water the earth and life grows there, so God breathes life into Adam, who contains within him the divine spark of the Creator.

AIR. Air is the animating element. Air is not mentioned explicitly in Genesis, but the word "Spirit" comes from the Hebrew *ruach*, meaning "wind or breath." And the word "soul" is translated from the Hebrew *nephesh* meaning a "breathing creature." Likewise in the Greek New Testament, "Spirit" derives from *pneuma*, meaning a current of air or breath, and "soul" derives from *psyche*, meaning to breathe. The ancients were correct in believing that breathing was necessary for life, but they had the sequence backwards. By their way of thinking, life is like a balloon: we live when air enters us and we die when air leaves us. But we know that breathing sustains life - it does not cause life - and the Genesis account clearly shows that God is the author of life, breathing life into Adam.

FIRE. Fire is the power of the Spirit. Since fire is too hot to touch and because fire can make living things disappear, the ancients considered it a property of the gods. There is no fire in the creation story, until God creates light. God created the sun on the fourth day, and it gave light and heat to the universe. Throughout the Bible account, fire is seen as an indication of God's activity in the world. God sent fire when God made a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:17). God rained down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24). God spoke to Moses in a burning bush (Ex. 3:2). And Revelation predicts that on the last day fire will come down from heaven and consume the evil ones (20:9).

WATER. Water is the primary creative agent, probably because of its association with childbirth. Water was (and is!) absolutely necessary to sustain life. It is through water that life comes and with water that life flourishes. On the second day of creation, God divided the waters, signifying that something new was about to begin. In the Bible, water is significant of fresh starts: Noah, the flood, and a new civilization (Gen. 6); Moses' name means 'drawn from water'; crossing the Red Sea from slavery into freedom (Ex. 14-15); crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land (Joshua 1); Jesus' baptism in the Jordan at the beginning of his ministry (Mark 1:9). And according to Jesus, one must be born of water and Spirit (air) to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5).

EARTH. Nearly as important as water to the creative process is earth. On the third day, God created earth from water. In the Bible account, water gives life to earth like a mother to a baby. Once earth is created, plant life erupted from earth on that same third day. Then God creates a human being from the "dust of the ground" and makes him a breathing creature. The prophet Jeremiah compares human beings to jars of clay (earth) being molded in the hands of God, the master potter (18:2-3). Jesus uses a combination of earth and water (mud) to heal the man born blind (John 9).

Air. Fire. Water. Earth. More recent scientific discoveries have relegated these four elements to the dustbin of history; our modern periodic table contains 118 elements and does not include the ancient

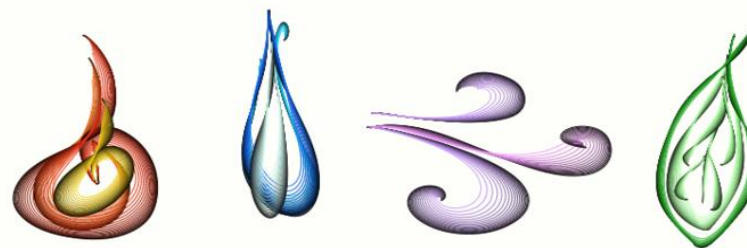
four elements. But before we dismiss air, fire, water and earth completely, we should consider that these four elements appear in the birth story of the Christian church.

On the first Pentecost (Acts 2), when the apostles are all gathered together *a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them* (2:2-3). The violent wind and the tongues of fire signaled God at work in the world once again. This air would bring new life to the disciples of Jesus and cause a new creation – the Church - to arise. The air and fire would animate the followers of Jesus and give them new purpose: to spread the gospel to the world. And on that first Pentecost, the Spirit of God would give each apostle the ability to speak in a manner so as to be heard and understood.

The apostles began by sharing the gospel with all the peoples of earth gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Acts 2 provides a long list of the different languages and cultures of earth's people who now heard the gospel of Jesus. The good news of the gospel is for all earth's people, for the whole of creation scattered around the globe.

As they hear the gospel, these different peoples are amazed and perplexed, so Peter begins to preach and explain to them how to enter the kingdom of heaven. He pleads with them to set aside their former lives, to repent and to seek God's forgiveness. According to the story some 3,000 people accepted Jesus that day, the waters of baptism becoming a sign of their new life in Christ. They entered the water of baptism as sinners seeking salvation; they emerged from the waters of baptism new creations in Christ Jesus.

As we spend time in God's good creation today, perhaps it's good for us to think on the four elements and what they represent. Air. Fire. Water. Earth. God actively at work in the world, bringing new life to lifeless hearts, new hope to hopeless souls, and new purpose to purposeless lives.



THE FOUR ELEMENTS

PENTECOST SUNDAY

June 8, 2014

THE FEDERATED CHURCH

Fergus Falls, MN

Genesis 1:1-2; 2:6-7

Acts 2:1-8, 12-21, 37-42

The ancient philosopher Plato was deeply impressed with the order and beauty he observed in the universe. In his work *Timaeus*, Plato presents an elaborately wrought account of the formation of the universe. Plato understood the universe to be the handiwork of a divine Craftsman who imposes mathematical order on a preexistent chaos to generate the ordered universe (*kosmos*). According to Plato, the primary building blocks of this divine Craftsman are fire, water, air and earth, and “the construction of the world used up the whole of each of these four elements. For the creator constructed it of all the fire, and water and air and earth available.”