

January 10 2021

Old Testament: Genesis 1:1-25

In the beginning, when God created the universe, ² the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit of God was moving over the water. ³ Then God commanded, “Let there be light”—and light appeared. ⁴ God saw that it was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness, ⁵ and he named the light “Day” and the darkness “Night.” Evening passed and morning came—that was the first day.

⁶⁻⁷ Then God commanded, “Let there be a dome to divide the water and to keep it in two separate places”—and it was done. So God made a dome, and it separated the water under it from the water above it. ⁸ He named the dome “Sky.” Evening passed and morning came—that was the second day.

⁹ Then God commanded, “Let the water below the sky come together in one place, so that the land will appear”—and it was done. ¹⁰ He named the land “Earth,” and the water which had come together he named “Sea.” And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then he commanded, “Let the earth produce all kinds of plants, those that bear grain and those that bear fruit”—and it was done. ¹² So the earth produced all kinds of plants, and God saw that it was good. ¹³ Evening passed and morning came—that was the third day.

¹⁴ Then God commanded, “Let lights appear in the sky to separate day from night and to show the time when days, years, and religious festivals begin; ¹⁵ they will shine in the sky to give light to the earth”—and it was done. ¹⁶ So God made the two larger lights, the sun to rule over the day and the moon to rule over the night; he also made the stars. ¹⁷ He placed the lights in the sky to shine on the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ Evening passed and morning came—that was the fourth day.

²⁰ Then God commanded, “Let the water be filled with many kinds of living beings, and let the air be filled with birds.” ²¹ So God created the great sea monsters, all kinds of creatures that live in the water, and all kinds of birds. And God saw that it was good. ²² He blessed them all and told the creatures that live in the water to reproduce and to fill the sea, and he told the birds to increase in number. ²³ Evening passed and morning came—that was the fifth day.

²⁴ Then God commanded, “Let the earth produce all kinds of animal life: domestic and wild, large and small”—and it was done. ²⁵ So God made them all, and God saw that it was good.

One: This is the Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: “Made Good”

Genesis chapter 1 has got to be

one of the most well-known and argued-about passages of Scripture, especially by those who do not consider themselves Christian.

Back in my former career, as an anthropologist, I used to teach this stuff to university undergraduates.

“Creationism” – the theory that the Judeo-Christian God created the universe – was taught right beside intelligent design

and other creation myths from religions around the world.
 All unprovable, of course, by scientific tests and methods,
 and deemed unreliable because of it.

The textbook I taught from stated that these myths and explanatory stories
 were invented in various human cultures
 to explain the existence of the world around them,
 before the light of science and reason dawned
 and we figured out the theory of evolution.

Evolution refers to the ways that different kinds of living things
 are thought to have developed and diversified
 from earlier plants and animals
 over the long hundreds of thousands
 and even millions of years of earth's history.

I always taught with a disclaimer
 that every system of knowledge,
 every way of understanding the world,
 was valuable and "true" within its own cultural setting;

that science was the dominant system of knowledge these days,
 but that didn't make religious stories
 less true
 for people who understood the world by faith...
 ...not sure if it helped much,
 given the highly skeptical looks I'd get in return!

But even as a university lecturer and as a Christian,
 as a person who worked in the sciences
 and understood the world by faith,
 I didn't find myself with an unresolvable conflict in my head.

And that's because evolutionary theory and Genesis 1
 are about two completely different aspects of life.
 The theory of evolution is a mechanism
 to explain *how* life has come to exist
 in the explosion of
 diversity and beauty and complexity
 we see around us;
 Genesis 1
 tells us *why*.

I think it's fair to say that when we read Genesis 1,
 we focus on *what's* being created;

it's easy and fun to get caught up
in picturing each new bit of our created world
as it happens.

In our imaginations, we can see a dark and churning sea,
lit up suddenly at God's command, for the very first time.
Right then and there, God establishes the turn of time
as the cycle of day and night begins.
The sky, dry land,
and the first bloom of plant life follows swiftly,
one after the other.

Sun and moon and stars are flung across the sky
to make the day warm and brilliant,
to punctuate the deep dark of night
with beauty and shimmering light.
The seas and skies and land
are soon filled with all sorts of life,
of all shapes and sizes and kinds.

Past the end of what we read today,
humanity is brought to being too, made in God's image;
and so is the relationship between these first two people:
a bond of love, mutual support and companionship.

Out of wildness and wastelands,
all the life we see before us now,
all the life that is in each one of us,
took form and shape.

And God saw that,
in all its diversity, complexity, and wild, abundant life,
the created world
was made good.

The creation story is a tremendous story,
like watching a master artist at his canvas,
painting a beautiful and awe-inspiring masterpiece,
full of intense colours and intricate detail.

But if we stop there,
with a beautiful picture and a six-day schedule of work,
then the creation story becomes
very like the evolution story;
all we've done is reflect on

how God created the world...
 ...and suddenly,
 this foundational story of our faith
 becomes one theory
 among many
 about how life
 came into existence.
 What's truly unique and special about Genesis 1
 is not how the world was created...
 ...but rather that it *was* created;
 and it tells us a lot about the God who created it.

So let's turn our thoughts away
 from how creation happened
 toward the God who is doing the creating.
 What can we learn about God
 from his creation of the world?

The first thing we can learn about God
 is that he had already been doing some preparatory work,
 before the story starts.

Genesis does not describe
 how the ocean deep came to be,
 or what caused it to be choppy,
 or how it is that some sort of spiritual wind
 blows about above the surface of the waves.

The earth is in a strange state of formless pre-existence,
 but it still "is" somehow.
 These things are simply taken for granted
 as already existing.

So Genesis starts not with the creation of all matter,
 but with God
 making, transforming, moving, and separating
 what's already made
 so that all life will be possible.
 God seems to have been
 readying the cosmos
 for some time
 before Genesis starts.

And then, God simply speaks.

When we talk about the Word of God,
we tend to think of Scripture, the Bible.
If we really believe that God speaks to us today through Scripture,
then perhaps we've been underestimating
the potential effect of these words
we read together every Sunday.

Because God speaks –
and light bursts forth,
land masses rise up out of the sea,
everything from mosquitoes to platypus to ostriches
come into being...
...God speaks, and reality is transformed.
That is a tremendous demonstration of power;
a very dangerous power,
if it belonged to any being other than God,
who creates only good things.

Because that is another thing we learn about God in Genesis:
everything God speaks into existence
is inherently good.
Light and land, sky and stars, plants and animals
...human beings...
at this moment when God speaks
all the parts of creation into existence,
it is all of it made good.

In our Creator, in the midst of God's great masterwork of creation,
we find a God who plans and prepares for his great acts,
who does a lot of his work for us
before we even know he's doing it,
laying the foundations
for an explosion of new, abundant life.

We find a God who is effortlessly and profoundly powerful,
whose words re-shape the whole of the universe,
who speaks
and in speaking, transforms and moves and makes.
And we find a God who must be good,
because all that he makes,

the creative expression
of God's vision for reality,
it's all inherently,
intrinsically, good.

And we also find a God who *is*.

What I mean by that is that there is no origin story for God.
God didn't come into being from somewhere else;
he isn't the offspring of some other pantheon of gods and goddesses;
God didn't fight his way to the top
of some divine corporation to get to be in charge;
God didn't boom into existence
alongside the Big Bang.
God simply is.

It's the underlying assumption of the whole Bible,
the basis for our faith-based system of knowledge:
God exists.
God always has been,
God always is,
and God always will be.

There's no direct attempt, anywhere in Scripture,
to defend or prove the existence of God;
that's certainly not what the creation story is about,
although we often try to use it that way.

The Bible gives us examples, permission, even,
to question and struggle with a lot of other truths...
...but never this one.
God simply is, and everything else that is,
exists because God created it
and the very reality in which it is situated.

[Even poor Job, from our children's story, didn't question God's existence...only what God was up to.]

And so we have our God, our Creator,
who plans and prepares,
who is powerful and good,
who simply is,
in every place and every moment of creation.

Under the weight of centuries of human thinkers
who have taught us to believe in
what we can see and hear and poke with a stick,
it's a challenge for us *not* to compare
our Christian creation story at the beginning of Scripture
against that same scientific measuring stick
of facts and calculations.

But our creation story shares with us very different
and far more important than science and theories of evolution;
And God didn't give us this story to answer questions
of how and what in the first place.

Rather, God has given us this story to tell us the bigger truths
like why things are the way they are,
and why we can sense so much beauty and wonder in the world,
in spite of the brokenness and suffering
that now touches all the good God made.
This story tells us who we are as created beings,
that we are made good and very good, too.

But more than anything,
we learn in Genesis 1 who is behind and in the midst of all this.
We discover that all along it has been the work of a very unique God,
a God of imagination and creative genius,
a God of goodness and power,
a God who never removes himself from creation
and who loves it deeply.

A God who loves it so deeply, in fact,
that he becomes a part of it at one point,
melding his own divine nature
with that of one of his image-bearing humans,
in order to make things good again,
the way God originally planned it.

In the person of Jesus,
the God who creates comes among us
in order to rescue and restore us.
Jesus came to take up a part in the very creation
that has become such a mess,
even going so far as to give
all that power and goodness over

to the Cross.

The love that is poured out by Jesus
moves over his faithful believers,
transforming and re-making us,
making it possible for us to share that love with one another,
nurturing the kind of faith
that can affirm the goodness and power of God,
even in the midst of
brokenness and suffering
we see now,
in God's good creation.

In his book, the *Weight of Glory*, Christian theologian C.S. Lewis wrote
"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen,
not only because I see it
but because by it, I see everything else."

Christian belief is big enough to fit in any system of knowledge,
any way of understanding the world,
that we humans can come up with;
Christian faith, as a way of understanding the world,
transforms us, moves us, re-makes us.

The story of creation, right at the beginning of Scripture,
is an invitation to a new way of seeing and understanding the world.
It's an invitation to live now
with a completely new perspective on that life,
both the wonderful and gentle parts
and what's difficult and broken:
a perspective that begins with God,
that's formed and shaped by his power and goodness,
that was made good and with love.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.