

"Let's Take It from the Top"

Genesis Sermon Series - Decisive Moments

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Genesis 1 - 2:3

We're going to be studying the book of Genesis this summer. Today we begin with Chapter 1, the first words in the Bible. The Israelites called the first five books of the Bible the Books of Moses, based on an ancient tradition that Moses compiled these stories. They also called these books, Torah, the Law, the Law of God, the ways of God revealed to them. These books are the foundation of Judaism. They're also foundational for Christians & Muslims. They're foundational for monotheism. So how would they begin these foundational books? What passage would begin sacred scripture?

Before we read Genesis 1, let me say a few words about what Genesis 1 is, and what it isn't.

First of all, what Genesis 1 isn't: It isn't Science. (this is obviously my opinion - you don't have to agree with me) The passage has some things that align with our current understanding of how the cosmos began. "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep," sounds like a good description of the humongous ball of ultra-hot, ultra-dense matter and energy that then exploded in the Big Bang and expanded outward forming the universe as we know it along the way. Genesis 1 also mentions a "Dome" that separates the water on the earth from the water in the skies. That dome sounds a bit like the Ozone layer that protects us from the sun's harmful radiation. They also had a sense that we get our days and years and seasons from the bright lights in the sky.

But Genesis 1 is not a science paper. If someone had written it 3000

years ago using today's scientific understanding and terminology, no one would have understood it for 3000 years. It was written using the understanding of the day. Just like the book of Psalms & Revelation mention the "four corners of the earth," a phrase that comes from a belief that the earth was flat.

It's important to remember that Science and Theology are two different disciplines and they concern themselves with mutually exclusive categories. Remember those questions - who? what? where? when? and why? Science deals with when? where? what? how? Science doesn't deal with who? It does deal with the why? but generally not in terms of an original cause. That's where theology comes in. So, Genesis is not a science textbook. It's a theology book. It's written to teach us about God, not science.

This chapter is also written entirely in Poetry. Some writers call this chapter the Creation Poem - a highly creative form of writing describing creation itself. Many people today would call Genesis 1 a Myth? But "myth" as it's commonly understood diminishes the faith & truth found within this chapter. Plus, myths usually involve stories. Genesis 1 really isn't a story. -only 1 character, no drama. Genesis 2 has a story to it, but not Genesis 1.

What Genesis 1 is, is a Proclamation. It's a Faith Statement. It's like a Creed. "This we believe. God is behind it all!" Let's take a look.

Genesis 1 - 2:3

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, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God

called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights-the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night-and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the

earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

In the Beginning there was God. In the Beginning there was just God. Before there was Day 1 of Creation, there was God. Before any matter existed there was God.

I did a little bit of research on the Big Bang theory this week. They've narrowed down the time period to 13.7 billion years ago. That's when they think the Big Bang started. I read on a couple of web sites that scientists have no idea what occurred prior to the Big Bang. They can only wildly speculate about the "formless, dark face of the deep." The Faith Statement of Genesis One tells us that before the Big Bang there was God. This means that God is distinct from creation. There is a Creator and a creation.

In Pantheism "god" and nature are one in the same. There's no distinction between Creator and Creation. So there never would have been a time when there was just God. In Hinduism "god" is simply part of every human spirit. The "Atman" is the "Brahman" is a foundational statement in Hinduism. The inner essence of each of us (Atman) is the Eternal Spirit of the Universe (Brahman). God is the sum total of the best of each of us. In some Primitive Religions "god" is the top of the totem pole, so to speak. Societies lift up certain attributes and then ascribe these attributes to their deities. In a sense, when this happens people are worshipping themselves, they're worshipping their best selves, urging themselves onward to be the best they can be. Their gods are the expression of what they value most. Instead of us being made in God's image, we remake God in our image.

There are some who think that the church in North America is guilty of the same thing. That we're really just worshipping ourselves and the values we feel are important. So we justify our materialism by saying that God wants us to be happy. And we don't overly commit to our faith because our society doesn't like religious radicals. And we're reluctant to share our faith because we want to be seen as tolerant, accepting people because these are values our society lifts up. We shape our lives around the values of our society and then we try to find these values

within our religion. It's an interesting and challenging thought, isn't it? - that our beliefs are shaped more by our society than our by our sacred texts. And if that's the case are we really worshipping God or ourselves?

I remember a Youth Group discussion years ago at one of my former churches. The kids were talking about how they could relate to Jesus. The image of a gentle carpenter who hung out with sinners, welcomed children, cared for poor, reached out to everyone - that was someone they could totally relate to and respect. Then one young man said, "I think Jesus was so cool that he actually did sin." That's conforming Jesus to our image, instead of us conforming ourselves into the image of Christ. It could also be a way of justifying sinning. WWJD? He wouldn't be uptight. He's cool!

In the Beginning there was God. Genesis 1 reminds us that God is not the top of our totem pole, the top story of our universe. God is God and we are God's Creatures, God's children. In the beginning, before there even was a beginning, there was God, the eternal One. But then there's a turning point, a decisive moment. God decides to create, to create something other than God's self. God decides to create galaxies, sun, moon and stars. God decides to give the spark of life to at least one of those planets (and probably many more).

And God creates human beings. Why? Religion does ask the why question. Why would God create anything else, especially humans with free will? - that could only mean heartache & pain! I think the answer is found in I John 4 - *"Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God and every one that loves is born of God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."* (I John 4:7&8)

God is love. God, in God's inner most essence, is love. So God creates a world to share that love. Everything God does is done out of love. A holy

God can not act contrary to his nature. We as imperfect, sometimes unholy people can act contrary to our nature, but God can not. So God creates the world and human beings out of love.

I remember attending a musical/comedy in college. I went with a few friends and the show was very funny. Seated right in front of us was one of our professors. He was sitting by himself. And throughout the show I noticed him looking around during the very funny moments. You know how when something really funny happens you find yourself looking for someone to share the laugh with? Well, he kept laughing and looking all night. Love is a lot like laughter- it just needs to be shared

So a loving God has to create a world in which to share that Divine love. That's why God enjoys the process of creating so much. "And God saw that was good!" You know how when children make something in school and they bring it home to show you, hoping you'll put it on the refrigerator? "Look what I made!" Genesis suggests that God had that same childlike joy in creating the world - "Look what I made." "And God said, 'It is good.'" God's love would now be shared.

There's one other thing i'd like you to remember about this passage. Scholars believe that this passage was very important to the Jews when they were in exile in Babylon (6th Century BC). Some think that that's when this passage was written in the form that we have it today. This was a time of despair and hopelessness for the Jews. This was a time of chaos - formless and dark. This was a time when they needed someone to say, "Let there be light." And so this divinely inspired text would have brought them great hope and comfort. Because it says that the world exists because God wanted it to exist. The world wasn't loosed on its own. God was behind it all. Creation itself was not a "careless, casual, or accidental matter" (Walter Brueggemann's Genesis commentary, p. 17). And the God of Israel, the one true God, is the Lord of life. God's behind it all. "And though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

Think of the orderliness of Genesis Ch. 1 - *"And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light . . . and it was good. And there was morning and evening, the first day."* The orderliness of God's Creating the World suggests that we live in a well-ordered world even when the Babylonians seem to be in charge of the place. One commentator puts it this way: "The design of the world is not autonomous or accidental. It is based upon the will of God." (Brueggemann, p. 30) "And God said . . . and it was so." This passage would have been incredibly reassuring to the Jews in exile. The world exists because God wants it to exist. Our God is a purposeful God. And our God has a purpose for us. God isn't finished with us yet.

It's interesting, the last book of the Bible uses this same technique. In the Book of Revelation John reassures the early church that God is still in control. They thought they were living in the end times, and they were being fiercely persecuted. So when John describes the end of the world he describes a very orderly process - 7 seals, 7 trumpets, 7 bowls of wrath, each unfolding the end of the world as we know it, according to God's sovereignty and plan.

Here's a silly way to think about this truth: If I'm driving in my car and I get a flat tire, Jesus does not jump off his throne in heaven and yell to God the Father, "Rich just had a flat tire!!!! What are we going to do?????"

Things are very orderly and calm in heaven. And that's helpful for us to remember here on earth.

Amen.