

Creation

I hope you brought your thinking caps today because this is going to require a lot of thinking. In fact, I suspect that what we're going to talk about today will be fairly novel for most of you. For some of you, it'll will challenge what you've been taught or assumed about the creation story. Don't worry, we won't go outside the bounds of Christian orthodox teaching or even outside the teaching of the Wesleyan Church. It might just be thinking about Genesis in a way you haven't thought about it before.

But I know there are others who will be pleasantly surprised or relieved to hear what you hear today because you've been living with a difficult tension between believing what you've been taught about creation in the church and what you've been taught about science. This is a real tension for many people.

The New Testament scholar Scot McKnight said that in his years as a professor teaching undergrad students Bible at a Christian college, the greatest challenge to his students' faith was what they perceived as the contradiction between science and religion. He said more students than he could count came from churches where their pastor preached that science to contradict the Bible.

And this left them with a crisis of faith. Either believe what the Bible says simply by faith and reject some pretty compelling scientific evidence out of hand, or believe the scientific evidence and reject the faith. He said many of them chose the latter. In recent

years, the creation story has been the tipping point that determines whether someone will continue in the faith or reject it.

But what I've found is that people don't have to choose between the Bible and science. Science, and scientists aren't against the Bible. Of course, some are, but not because of science. Many scientists are "against" the Bible because of a pre-commitment to materialism, which is summarized in the famous statement of Carl Sagan, "*The Cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be.*" That's not a scientific finding, it's a faith commitment.

But here's why we don't have to choose. The Christian tradition has long taught that God authored two books: *The Bible*, on one hand and "the book of nature" on the other. We interpret and apply the truths of the Bible through exegesis and hermeneutics—the techniques of translation. We interpret the natural world through science. Both are authored by God and they inform each other.

The Bible is our ultimate authority, but we can learn to understand the Bible through science. We said last week that we believe the Bible to be the inerrant word of God—but our interpretation of it is not inerrant. So, we use the tools we have—like linguistics, archaeology, geography, astronomy and horticulture to help us understand Scripture. The same is true of geology, earth science and genetics. These disciplines can help us learn to interpret Scripture.

The classic example of this is how Copernicus' idea that the earth isn't the center of the universe, but that the earth revolves around the sun changed how we read certain

parts of Scripture. Our understanding of the physical universe told us that when we read Genesis 8:2 that says, “**2Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky,**” there aren’t literal floodgates holding back the rain, but it’s figurative language. Science can help us know how to read certain passages in Scripture. And I believe that’s the case with our passage today, Genesis, chapter 1.

This passage is the one that makes more people believe they have to choose between the Bible and science than any other. But there are two important principles that help us solve this issue.

The first is this: *the Bible did not intend to correct the science of the day*. Last week, we said the Bible isn’t a science textbook. But God revealed himself at a particular point in history to a particular group of people. And in order to communicate with them, he needed to do so in a way they would understand. But the purpose was not to correct their science, but to communicate the truth about God, humanity, and salvation. And I believe that when we spend all our time trying to prove the science of the Bible, we run the risk of missing what God is really intended to communicate to us.

Here’s the second principle that can help us: *How we read this passage depends what kind of literature it is*. How does that make a difference? Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman uses this example. Listen to this from the biography of David Marplethorpe.

"The clock on the mantelpiece said 10:30, but someone said the clock was wrong. As the dead woman lay on the bed in the front room, a no-less silent figure glided rapidly from the house. The only sounds to be heard were the ticking of that clock and the loud wailing of an infant."

Now, let's ask some questions about the scene. Who is the woman on the bed and how did she die? Who was the silent figure slipping out of the house? Well, if it's a personal biography, we'd say the woman on the bed is a mother who just died in childbirth and the silent figure is the mid-wife.

But now, instead of a biography, let's say we're reading a murder mystery. How do we answer those same questions? The silent figure slipping out the door was the murderer who just killed the woman who was laying on the bed. So, how we interpret the story depends on what kind of literature it is.

So, the question is, "what kind of literature is Genesis 1 and 2?" Well, one way to answer that would be to say Genesis 1 is *literal, factual history*. Then we'd say Adam and Eve are the actual first humans, created directly by God on the sixth 24-hour day. We would also say that all the details happened exactly the way it describes in the order it describes. And usually, people who advocate for the literal view try to show how the Genesis account lines up with the current science.

But, there are some problems with this view. First, there are some real contradictions with modern science. For instance, in this view, the age of the earth is

about 6000 years, but modern science estimates that the earth is anywhere from 3.6 to 4.6 billion years old. So, to hold this view, you have to either ignore modern science or say science is wrong about the age of the earth.

Another problem is that Genesis has two creation accounts and we can't take both literally because they would contradict each other. For instance, in Genesis 1, God made plants on the third day and humans on the sixth day. But Genesis 2 says there were no plants when humans were created.

There are some other issues like the fact that we determine day and night by the sun and moon, but in Genesis 1 the sun and moon aren't created until the fourth day. It also raises the age-old questions of where Adam and Eve's sons found their wives.

So, because of this and other questions, some people don't buy the answers literalist answers, so they swing to the other end of the spectrum and say, "Genesis seems to be an ancient myth just like all the other origin myths from the Ancient Near East like the Enuma Elish, Atrahasis or the Baal Myth." This option is attractive for many people because it solves some of the problems of the literal view.

But, if you compare the Genesis account to other ancient origin stories, there are HUGE differences. For instance, ANE myths always take place in a timeless primordial space. It all happens among the gods and it has strange, and fantastic details. Humans are almost always an accident. In fact, in one Babylonian story, humans are made from the dust of the ground, the blood of the demon God combined with his spit.

Now, while there are some similarities with these myths, like humans being made from dust, the Genesis story is anchored in time and space. Each day, the Biblical account says, “And there was morning and there was evening, the third day.” All the pagan myths are basically the same, but the Genesis account is entirely unique in the ancient world.

My seminary Old Testament professor, John Oswalt defines myth this way, “*Myth speculates on the nature of reality then uses time and space to justify this view.*” So, whatever you call the Biblical account, it’s not myth, because the Genesis account is just the opposite—it uses historical events to teach us about the nature of reality.

So, what kind of literature is Genesis 1? Well, we don’t have to choose between just the two options. I would tend to agree with the view that Genesis one is “*Theological History.*” In other words, it’s apparent that Genesis 1 intends to describe events that happened within time and space—real places, real people, real time. But it also seems apparent that it doesn’t describe them scientifically in the way we understand science or historically in the way we understand history.

But God, through the writer of Genesis and within the language and thought of the day, communicated his purposes for the world and humanity. I wish I had more time to go into more detail, but if you have questions you want to talk about this, don’t hesitate to get in touch with me and we can walk through it together.

I do think it’s critical that we understand this account because this passage is foundational for what Christians believe about the God, ourselves and the world. So, I

want move on and to spend the rest of our time talking about seven foundational truths I believe God is communicating to us through the Creation account.

First, God created everything and loves his creation. Genesis 1:1 says, **“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...”** As I mentioned before, this is very different from the origin myths in the ancient world. In fact, we can’t really call them creation stories because the material world usually came into existence through a divine accident. As a result there was no intent and no purpose.

Now, compare that view to an atheistic worldview today and ask, how is this different than the old pagan view? The universe is an accident. There is no purpose. Chaos reigns. Not only does the Biblical contradict the pagan view, but it contradicts atheism because the Genesis describes creation as an intentional act of a loving creator.

Over and over throughout Genesis 1, God creates something, steps back from it and it tells us, **“God saw that it was good.”** It wasn’t chaos and the natural world isn’t naturally evil, it’s good.

Now, this also contradicts an error that has been in the Church since the beginning. The error is called *Gnosticism*. Gnosticism taught that *spirit* is good, *material* is bad. That’s why many Christians throughout church history have considered extreme asceticism, to be the height of spirituality. If we deny ourselves food, sex or anything else we can enjoy, we’re holy because we’ve rejected the evil of the flesh. But the Genesis

story runs counter to this by teaching us that creation is good God cares about it. Your body is not evil. Even pleasure is good as long as it stays in its bounds. //

Now, most people, who believe in God today, take for granted the idea that God is love. They don't know that this view of God is unique to the Bible. The pagan religions didn't view God this way. Their gods were chaotic and self-interested. They didn't love humanity. The best you could say about the gods is that they found humans useful, but mostly we were an annoying accident.

But the Bible tells us that the world is filled with purpose. In fact, verses 3-25, don't describe creating things out of thin air. Notice that verse 1 says, **"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."** We call this creation Ex Nihilo— or "out of nothing."

But then look at verse 2, **"Now the earth was formless and empty..."** So, God brings matter into existence in verse 1, then verse 3-25 describes God bringing order out of chaos. This isn't make a scientific claim about what was created first and what was next. It's saying that God brought order into the world to inject it with purpose. This is the act of a designer with a plan, not a purposeless accident. //

Second, it tells us that *God is outside of, but near to his creation.* This is one of the many ways the Genesis account is different than pagan religions. These religions, and some today, teach that the gods are nature. So, pagan religions had the sun god and the moon god. God is the trees and animals. That's why they always made idols that looked like cows and birds and goats.

But the Biblical story teaches that God is *transcendent*—*meaning* outside of the material world. That’s why God is so against worship using idols, even if we think of the god of the Bible while we’re doing it. To worship idols is to buy into a pagan concept that God is contained within creation. But God is outside and above—the king of creation.

Now, there are some who believe God is transcendent, but he’s so transcendent that he has nothing to do with his creation today—this is what we call *deism*. God made the world, wound it up like a watch, and now he sits back and watches things play out without intervening. But that is also not the God of the Bible.

Genesis 1 shows us a God in intimate relationship with his creation—especially humanity—a God who is not far away, but gives humanity dignity and authority over creation. Even though God is outside of creation, he has not left it alone.

Third, *Genesis tells us that humans are creatures, but we are made in the image of God.* The Biblical story always keeps the clear distinction between creator, creation, and creature. God is above all, but humanity is unique in that we are a bridge between creator and creation. This is what we call the “Image of God.” Genesis 1:26 says, “**Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...’**” What does that mean?

Well, the Bible doesn’t spell it out, exactly, but Christian tradition has held that it means a number of different things. First, it means that *human life has unsurpassable worth*. We are creatures, but we are not just creatures. Human life is infinitely more valuable than the life of a cat or a cow or a tree. Human life has intrinsic value because

even in the saddest shape, when we're disabled, or even unborn, we reflect the likeness of God. Even your enemies are creatures made in the image of God. As C.S. Lewis says, "There are no mere mortals."

The second implication brings us to our next foundation. The image of God in us means that *we have the responsibility to order the world toward flourishing.* Back to verse 26, **"The God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...' Why? "...so that he may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animal, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."**

It continues when we skip down to verse 28, **"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.'"** We reflect the image of God when we work for the flourishing of the world. What does that mean?

Well, it means that your purpose isn't just your happiness. It means that we should treat all humans with dignity as creatures made in the image of God. It also means we have the responsibility to care for the earth. Christians who don't care about the environment are act contrary to the purpose for which we are created. Of course, we are to care for humans first, but we are not called to exploit the earth so we can be more comfortable. Christians should be the best environmentalists, not because we worship creation, but because God loves his creation and has put us in charge of caring for it. The last three points describe some of this flourishing.

Fifth, Genesis teaches us that marriage is critical to human flourishing. This is why Christians make such a big deal out of marriage. Now, remember that creation describes God ordering the world toward flourishing—bringing order out of chaos. So, it's intentional that it says, **“God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female, he created them.”** And look what about it in chapter 2, **“²⁴That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”** Male and female is not incidental to marriage, it's by design.

Despite what some say, marriage was not invented by humans to subjugate women. Now, certainly it's been used that way at times. But ultimately marriage is the foundation of society because it creates the optimal environment to bring children into the world and raise children. There is something about a man and woman—mom and a dad—who, together take their God-given responsibility seriously that creates the best environment for a child. Society does the best when it encourages healthy marriages.

Sixth, it gives us the principle of Sabbath. Here's chapter 2, verse 4, **“Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing, so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”**

I know some people say Sabbath is no big deal because it's just a Law that Israel was supposed to follow that doesn't really apply anymore, but the foundation for the

Sabbath law is found right here in the creation story. That's why in Exodus 20, in the 10 Commandments, it says this, ⁸**“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”**

So, the law finds its foundation in the creation story. And what you see here is the counter-cultural wisdom of God. Sabbath isn't just an arbitrary rule. Sabbath is for our good. First, it's a weekly holiday of sorts, where we stop to remember, give thanks and worship God. Second, to practice the Sabbath is to practice *trust* in God. For many people, especially in our society today, there's a real temptation to work seven days a week. We have to work, we have to produce, we have to make a living. It's all on us.

But to set aside one day, where we don't work, but we dedicate it to rest and to worship practices trust that God will provide.

And that brings us to our final take-away from the creation story. *God asks us to trust him by doing things according to his wisdom, not our own.* We'll dive deeper into this last one next week when we talk more about Adam and Eve and the fall. But over the course of this series, we'll see that trust in God is the key issue all throughout the Bible.

At every turn the Bible challenges us with the decision of who is on the *throne—who will rule*. The story of the Bible tells us that we have been given the responsibility to care for God's creation and to order our lives according to God's wisdom. But he has also given us the freedom to do what's right in our own eyes.

Now, whether or not you believe the Bible...well, that's up to you. But if you don't, what story anchors you? What story infuses your life with meaning? What story gives you a reason to get up in the morning and infuses your work with purpose? What story keeps you walking the straight path rather than being blown around by the current winds of culture? When you submit yourself to God through the story of the Bible, I believe all those things will follow.