

“Original Blessings”
Genesis 1:1 – 2:25
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The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Introduction to Series

We’re embarking on a great adventure: for the next 50 weeks we will explore some of the most important stories in the Bible. Many of them will be familiar stories, stories we all know and remember. Others will be stories you may not recall as vividly as your favorites. If you grew up in the church, I’m sure you’ve heard all these stories before, and I’d like to rekindle your interest in all of them. I’ve named this year-long adventure “Stories We Can’t Live Without” because I believe these really are *life-giving* stories. These stories teach us about God, about ourselves, our relationship with one another, about the purpose of our life in Christ.

I love the way Yale Divinity School Dean Harry Attridge says it:

“[The Bible] does what stories do: shapes imagination, inspires hope, hones sensibilities, wrestles with ambiguity. The Bible tells a large story ... a story of God’s relationship with the world, which begins in the wonder of cosmic beneficence and ends in reconciled peace. Between beginning and end come frustration, betrayal, estrangement, reconciliation, bitter dispute, joyous restitution. Between alpha and omega lies, in other words, the human condition as we know it, fallenness and alienation, redeemed by an all-encompassing love” (Harold W. Attridge, “Can We Trust the Bible,” *Reflections*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 6-7).

Which is why I am confident that in this year ahead, we will not be studying Scripture at the *expense* of “real life.” The issues of today – war, leadership, sexuality, family life, national identity – all of these are writ large in Scripture. With that in mind, then, let us begin at the beginning, with Genesis. Our first series deals with the most basic stories of the Bible: creation, sin and forgiveness, Abraham’s call and promise, Jacob’s blessing and deception, Joseph’s betrayal and redemption. One of my favorite Bible commentaries, *The Bible for Dummies*, notes that:

“as the ‘book of beginnings,’ Genesis seeks to answer some of the big questions in life:

- Where did we come from?
- Why are we here?
- Is there a God? ... [and if so, what is God like?]
- Why do we die?
- Why is there evil in the world?
- Why can’t we all just get along?
- Why are there weeds in my garden? (Really, Genesis answers this question, but unfortunately with no immediate remedies.)” (Jeffrey Geoghegan and Michael Homan, *The Bible for Dummies* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2003), p. 34).

The first of these questions – about our origins and the nature of God -- are answered in Genesis 1 and 2, which we’ll read this morning.

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Who are we, and why are we here? We are so used to hearing the Bible’s answers that we forget there were other, very different, ancient responses. The Mesopotamian creation story, the Enuma Elish, describes the creation of humanity as the product of the blood of warring gods. The

ancient Greeks told of humans created to be play-things of the gods, hapless entertainment at best, entrapped slaves at worst.

Who are we, and why are we here? We moderns have come up with answers to those questions too. We speak of origins with phrases like “he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth” or “she came from the wrong side of the tracks.” We talk about identity in terms of work -- “she is a patent lawyer”; “they own the company” – or in terms of status – “Exmoor or Onwentsia, Yale or U. of I.” – or in terms of politics – “left of Lenin, right of Attila the Hun.”

The Bible tells a very *particular* story of who we are and how life began. Let me be clear: the Bible is not a science text; it was never intended to be, and we do the Word of God a grave disservice by trying to force it into that mold. In fact, the book of Genesis opens with not one but *two* creation stories, each of which tells a truth with a capital T.

The first account, which Corey and Patrick read, was probably written when Israel was in exile during the sixth century B.C. ... in a time of great uncertainty, insecurity and upheaval. It tells the story of creation this way: deliberately, elegantly, with the reassuring and stately unfolding of the universe according to God’s plan. Out of darkness and a formless void, only God exists, before all things, beyond all things, the author of all things through word alone. The gospel of John mimics the beginning this way: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and through the Word all things were made.” God spoke, and it was so: on the first day, light; on the second day, waters and sky; on the third day, dry land and plants. Then God went about filling them: on the fourth day, God made sun, moon and stars to provide the light; on the fifth day, fish and birds to fill the waters and sky; on the sixth day, animals and human beings to fill the dry land.

Each part of creation has its own place with its own kind. We humans are the last things made, the pinnacle of God’s creation. We alone are made in God’s image; male and female equally in God’s image and likeness. And we alone are made to be the stewards of creation, to be like the God who creates order and beauty, and who blesses it, and calls it good.

How different does the second story sound! Written in a much earlier time – the ninth or tenth century B.C., when Israel was struggling with its new and tenuous national identity, it tells the creation story this way: God made the earth and heavens, but hasn’t yet created plants or animals or even rain. The *first* thing that the Lord God does is form the human being – by scooping up dirt from the ground, and breathing life into it. In a play on words in Hebrew, *Adam*, the human, is made from *adamah*, the dust of the earth. But it is not good that *Adam* be alone, so God creates animals and birds, and gives him dominion over them, to give them names. Still none is a fit partner, and so God causes *Adam* to fall asleep, and takes a rib, and makes two people out of one. Then, and only then, does *Adam* become male: in Hebrew *ish*, whose partner is *ishah*, female. He does not have dominion over her; he does not get to name her ... until after their fall from grace.

Nice analysis, you might say, and interesting reading of the text. But, you might argue, what difference does any of this make? It’s a fair question, and all the Hebrew scholarship in the world doesn’t matter if we don’t get to an answer.

Here’s what I think: I think the Bible’s stories of creation address the *most important* questions we will ever ask: Who are we? Why are we here? Is there a God, and what is God like? And both creation stories, woven together artfully, skillfully, answer us this way:

It is in our DNA that we are made in the image of God. God's breath lives in us; God's image shines through us; and *every* child on earth is a child of God.

Yet we are *not* God, and to that extent, the poet Henley is wrong: I am not "master of my fate," I am not "captain of my soul." The Lord alone is. The Bible reminds us that God is our creator; we are dependent on God for the food we eat, the land on which we walk, the very breath we breathe.

And it is our proper place in the universe – *not* God, but creatures in the image of God – that answers the question "why are we here?" Our *raison d'être* is not the pursuit of happiness; rather, our fundamental purpose is to be God's stewards, caretakers of creation on God's behalf. When, in Genesis 1, God gives us "dominion" over the earth, one commentator notes, God is asking us "to do for the earth what a king is supposed to do for his kingdom": to promote the welfare of those in his care (*Bible for Dummies*, p. 39). When, in Genesis 2, the Lord God gives Adam all the creatures to name, God is asking us to take care of the animals as we would the children that we bear and name. Ecology isn't a new concept; it is as ancient as Scripture. We are *in relationship* with the world and its living creatures; we are to care for them as God has cared for us.

And that is our primary purpose on earth: to be in relationship with God and one another; to care. It is a part of our hard-wiring, Scripture tells us. We're most familiar with Genesis 2: "It is not good that man should be alone"; but Genesis 1 is just as clear: "God created humankind in God's own image; male and female God created them," which tells us that the very image of God is to be in and for relationships (Cynthia Campbell, "Response to Colin Gunton," *Theology Today* (October 1986), p. 332, cited by Thomas D. Walker, in "Images of God," a sermon preached 10/28/90 at First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee). Over and over again the Bible tells us that, as Robert Putnam says it, "Bowling Alone" is not how we were meant to live. We are part of a larger family, and our kinship to one another gives us our very identity. The genealogies that come, incessantly, throughout the Bible? They are no accident, but a regular, tangible reminder that we belong to each other, all of us. It is when we forget this that we get into trouble ... which is where the story of Cain and Abel will take us next week.

But finally, for this week, the first chapters of Genesis lead us to the most important question of all, even more important than "Who are we?" Genesis invites us to ask, forthrightly, "Who is God?" And I love the fact that Scripture doesn't reduce the Lord to one, flat portrayal. From the very beginning, God is both transcendent and intimate, far away and close by. The Lord is, in the words of the hymn-writer, "immortal, invisible, God, only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." Yet God is also, in the words of another, the one to whom we can pray, "precious Lord, take my hand, lead me home." If some of us here think of God's presence as sheer mystery, indefinable, a force of the universe that moves beyond our mere human dimensions, you will find that God in Genesis 1. And if others of us here feel the Lord's presence as closely and dearly as a father or mother or friend, you will find that God in Genesis 2. And if, as it appears now that even Mother Theresa did, you experience only the absence of God, just wait; even that God is found in Scripture, in the darkness of Job, in the laments of the Psalms, in the words of Christ himself. Who is God? From the beginning, God is the One who creates, in whose image we are made ... and God is the One who loves, and who blesses, and invites us to be a blessing in his name. Amen.