

“In the Beginning...”

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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We begin our journey through the First Testament at the beginning, Genesis 1. The book of Genesis is not really a history book in the usual sense. It's certainly not a science book in any sense. It is theology, literally “words about God.” And the first few chapters are poetry.

1 In the beginning when God created^[a] the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God^[b] swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness (God) called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷ 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. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And so on through each day, the creation of vegetation and sun and moon and fish and birds and mammals. Picking up at verse 27:

*... God created humankind^[c] in (God's) image,
in the image of God (God) created them;^[d]
male and female (God) created them.*

²⁸ 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...” ³¹ God saw everything that (God) had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Again, the creation accounts in Genesis—there are two of them—are not history nor science. They are theology, words about God. What does the poet tell us about the relationship between God and the Creation?

The universe was not an accident. It was created.

And it is good.

And God entrusted this good creation to the care of the humans. Let's look at each of these in turn.

In the beginning, God...

That is a statement of faith. It is also the conclusion that more and more scientists come to, based on their research into the beginnings of life on earth. We have had Dr. Philip Rolnick of St. Thomas University come present to us a couple of times on the intersection of science and theology. In his presentations he showed us a number of places in the formation of the universe where things had to go just right in order for life to come into being. And I mean JUST RIGHT, with a precision that is almost unimaginable.

Here's just one example. He writes of the relationship between the mind-boggling explosive power of the Big Bang which began the universe, and the power of gravity. He writes:

Gravity and an explosion work in opposing ways: gravity pulls things together; an explosion makes things fly apart. Because of the colossal force of the big bang explosion, the space of the universe has been expanding, so that things within space have been flying apart for 13.8 billion years. There are two opposite calamities that would prevent getting a life-supporting universe. On the one hand, if the outward force were too strong, expansion would be so rapid that no important structural interactions could occur; everything would be too distant from everything else. On the other hand, gravity could be so strong that it would stop outward expansion and collapse everything back into the originating point. Too much or too little brings disaster, where no life ever appears. The universe's rate of expansion, known as the Hubble constant, is a delicately balanced tug-of-war between its outward and inward forces...

*According to physicist Paul Davies, (less than a nanosecond, way less) after the big bang, the explosive outward force was already counterbalanced by the inward force of gravity to one part in 10 to the 60th power. Amazing, a change of just one part in 10 to the 60th power in either direction, too much gravity or too much outward force, would have prevented the formation of a life-bearing universe. (Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics*, p. 179). (It's got to be exactly that much gravity.) For those not familiar with the mathematical notation, 10 to the 60th power is shorthand for the enormous number 1 with 60 zeroes behind it. To have a universe whose existence depends on accuracy to one part in 10 to the 60th power illustrates what is meant by "fine-tuning." The outward push of expansion and the inward pull of gravity have been performing a multi-billion-year dance of equilibrium. (*Origins: God, Evolution, and the Question of the Cosmos*. pp.131-132)*

And that is just one example of several that Rolnick gives. The science shows us that life on earth as mere coincidence is statistically absurd.

After the first service Rod Myers noted that Bill Bryson addresses this topic in a more reader-friendly version in his book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

In the beginning, God.

Did any of you travel to see the eclipse? I traveled to Edina. At the time of the eclipse I was in Edina driving back from a meeting and I was listening to MPR on the radio. One of the science commentators on MPR that day told the story of an astronomer she knew who had prided himself on being a man of science and, in his opinion, therefore an atheist. But about 20 years ago he witnessed for the first time a solar eclipse. He reported, "I was overwhelmed. It all just 'came together' for me and because of that experience I became a Christian that day. And I still am." Again, that was MPR, not KTIS or some other Christian radio station.

In the beginning, God.

This morning I was listening to MPR, as I usually do on Sunday mornings while I shave. Krista Tippet's marvelous program, "On Being," airs at 6:00. Today's guest was Maira Kalman, a delightful, whimsical artist and writer. One of her observations: "We have trees. What more do we need?"

The Creation is so astonishing. Granted, nature is not all bunnies and butterflies. As Alfred Lord Tennyson and others before him noted, "nature is red in tooth and claw"...If you're not on the top of the food chain nature can be cruel. And the victims of hurricanes and tornadoes and floods and mudslides and earthquakes will note that nature is not all benign loveliness. I'll grant you that.

But such amazing things we find in nature. We could well think together about the vastness and complexity of the universe, perhaps as many as 100 billion galaxies, some of them with 100 billion stars each. Or we could ponder the amazing invisible microorganisms, but let's look at some more accessible wonders.

I pulled together just a few fun photos. Photos from the Field Museum photo contests (slides)

In the beginning, God.

Second. God saw what She had created and called it... good.

Through the millennia there have arisen various religious groups that believe that all physical matter, all things, including our bodies, are evil and that only “spirit” is good. But that is not the message of the biblical creation accounts and the Church has consistently declared such beliefs as heresy. The Church asserts that Creation is a good gift from God. (As I typed those words at my desk on my porch Friday morning I glanced up to see a hummingbird hovering right outside my window sipping from my ivy geranium.) Coincidence? I said, “Thank you.”

Creation is a good gift from God.

And *you* are a good gift from God. Theologians talk about human sinfulness, but often fail to note that sin is not the first word in the Bible about humankind. The first word is our original righteousness, that we are created by the Loving Creator and in the Creator’s own image.

The Creation, including us, is good.

Third, God says to us, “Take care of it.” The old King James Version of Genesis 1 and most translations thereafter, including our New Revised Standard Version, state that humans are to “have dominion over” the creation. Through the centuries many took that as divine sanction for using and abusing the earth, the water, the air, the animals. But the correct translation, the correct understanding of the Hebrew, is that humans are given the responsibility to be stewards of the creation. A steward is someone who takes care of that which belongs to someone else. God calls us to take care of this wondrous Creation.

Quiz. A previous president’s science advisory committee sent him a report warning of coming climate change due to the increased carbon dioxide content of the air. Which President first received that warning? Lyndon Johnson in 1965. Over 50 years ago.

Now we are seeing that the scientists were right, with new global temperature records each month, melting of the polar ice caps and so many effects of climate change. One which the scientists have been warning us about is the increasing severity of weather *extremes*—storms and floods on the one hand, heat and drought on the other. No kidding.

The focus in the US in recent weeks has logically been on Hurricane Harvey and now Hurricane Irma. Mind-boggling devastation. Harvey claimed 83 lives. Meanwhile, monsoons in India and Bangladesh at the same time as Harvey killed more than 1200 people and disrupted the lives of 42 million. Mudslides in Sierra Leone two weeks earlier claimed 1000 lives.

As well as the biblical mandate, it is obviously in our own self-interest to care for the earth. To that end, here in our own congregation, the Session of Oak Grove, under the leadership of the Green Committee has contracted with a consultant to help us find the best ways to reduce our carbon footprint. We have already gone to LED lighting throughout most of the building and soon will convert here in the sanctuary. We will be replacing our HVAC system with much more energy-efficient units. Thanks to an anonymous gift we are currently getting our electricity through Windsorce, and we continue our efforts to join a community solar garden, as well as possibly putting solar panels on our roof. Thanks so much to all the folks working on this, and to the anonymous Windsorce donor.

This beautiful blue-green globe is a wondrous gift from the hand of God, and we are called to care for it.

So, recap. What do I want us to take away from this look at Genesis 1? I want us to be awestruck by the Creation and thus, the Creator. I want us to be reminded that we humans are created in the image of God, and that we are loved. And finally, I want us to remember our responsibility, our mandate, to care for the Creation on God's behalf.

I am reminded of the famous quote by Helen Keller: "I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

Amen?