

The Story of God and Us: Creation

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Genesis 2:4-9

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2:4-9 (NRSV)

O God open us up to whatever word you have for us in the midst of these words I share. God, open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts that we might feel. And then O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

My wife and I like in the evenings to watch television. We probably watch too much television, if you want to know the truth of it. We're sort of the old school when we come in and say, "What's on TV tonight?" When the truth is that almost anything is on TV every night, you can stream it whenever you want to see it on demand. And we kind of liked the old days when there were really only three stations plus your PBS station. You had ABC, CBS, and NBC, and you looked to see what was on, and that was kind of your only real choice. That really made it easier, but right now, you have thousands of shows, a huge menu that overwhelms you.

So, we're always trying to figure out what to watch. You have to have Netflix, HBO, Prime Video, Apple Plus, if you want to watch any of those things that are being advertised. We'll open up the menu and begin to look around. And part of the problem is that Dee and I have differing opinions, different desires on what kind of movie to watch. I prefer to watch an action film or a

suspense film, one of those shows where you don't really know what's going to happen and you're on the edge of your seat. Dee says, "I'd like to watch something funny." Whether it's a comedy or a romantic comedy, she likes those because she says they're refreshing after all the bad news we see every day.

But what we both like is that the movie, whatever it is, moves right along. It's got a plot to it. It's not just a description, but it has a plot that keeps you interested that makes you want to lean forward. It has round and interesting characters that you want to get to know. The truth is that we like a happy ending. You want it to resolve in the end. There's tension in it, and then it resolves at the end.

The Christian faith is not primarily based on a list of rules. The Biblical faith is not primarily a set of religious practices or even ethical practices. Although all of those grow out of it and are a part of it, the Christian faith is based primarily on a story. It's the truest of all true stories. It's the story of God and us. And it has movement, it has broken relationships, and reconciled relationships, and it moves toward a resolution, a happy ending if you will. It's the truest story there is.

I wonder if you can tell the story of God. If someone comes to you and says, "So you're a Christian? Tell me about that." Could you tell the story? Obviously, you can't describe all the intricacies along the way but the basic movements that are the essence of the faith. Can you tell that?

Look, that's our goal during this summer season. We want you to be able to tell the story of "God and Us." To know the basic simple truths and to be able to share them with confidence with other people.

So, every story has to have a beginning, but maybe, more importantly, every story has to have an author. And the author of our story is God. Let's start then at the beginning of the story - the very beginning - with creation.

It begins with the first four words of the Bible. "In the beginning, God..." God is the prime mover, the author of life, the author of creation.

Some years ago, a mother in our congregation called me and said that her four-year-old son had questions that she couldn't answer. She wanted to know if they could come to talk to me about how to answer the questions. I said, "Sure." Now I don't know why it is, but when you think about how many grandchildren I have that a four-year-old would not intimidate me, but

they intimidate me. I was a little nervous about this. I had reason to be when I heard his first question. He asked, "So God made everything?" I said, "Yes, God made everything." I got that down. Then he asked, "So who made God?" Now that's such a good question. I don't know who made God and what you say is "God always was. Nobody ever made God. God always was."

And that doesn't make sense, so you struggle with these difficult questions. The essence is, "In the beginning, there was God." And everything else derived from the author of creation.

Now there are a number of things when we read this creation story that I want us to take hold of. And things that are important for us. The first one is that when God created everything and created you and me, God created us, God said we were good. And we were made in God's image.

We get the best picture of this in Genesis 1. We read Genesis 2 as our Scripture for today, but Genesis 1 sort of says it in a couple of ways. If you remember the story, God creates the universe, then divides the universe into the sky above and the sea below, then creates the expanse of the world, then the plants and animals. Then God creates human beings. And after each day of creation, God says, "It is very good." The word is *tov* - which means excellent or beautiful or awesome. It is an amazing word, not just good.

And at the end of the creation of human beings, male and female, God says, "It was very good." It was even better than good.

There's another picture of it we might look at. I want to show you some paintings, and I want you to think to yourself, talk to the people around you, what do these paintings all have in common? Let's look at this one, and this one, and this one. Then there's this one, and this one, and finally, look at this one. What do all those paintings have in common? Well, they're all self-portraits. They're all paintings by the artist.

The Scripture says that you and I are created in God's image. That we are God's self-portrait.

I heard a sermon by Pastor Steven Furtick some years ago, and I really liked the image he used. He says, "My maker is my mirror. God is our mirror." When you look in the mirror, what do you see? I get up in the morning, I go look in the mirror, I see bags under my eyes, and I see age creeping up on me. I can see the weight of the day already there as I look in the mirror. But sometimes when we look in the mirror, what we see are mistakes. We see our failures, our shortcomings. You look in the mirror, and you say to yourself, "You're the woman who had an

affair." Or you say, "There you are - you're the man who can't seem to find work." Or "You're the one who can't make a marriage work." Or "You're the one who doesn't really read the Bible or pray at all." Or "You're the one who can't seem to beat that addiction."

What we see too often when we look in the mirror are our flaws. But what God says, "When you look in the mirror, you should see me, because that's who I made you to be." Yes, we're sinful, we're broken, and we're going to talk about that next week. But the truth is we were made in God's image. So that our core identity, at the very basic sense of who we are is we are good. Human beings were created good - in God's image. And that's what we need to see. We need to live out of that. Live out of that goodness, live out of the Christ that is living in us. We are made to be good. And we're made in God's image no matter whether we are male or female, black or white or brown or any shade, whether we're gay or straight, whether we're old or young. No matter who we are we are in God's image. We've got to own that, and claim that, and believe that and live out of that core identity.

So, first, we were created good and in God's image. Here's the second thing that this creation story teaches us. And perhaps it's the most important. We are made to be in relationship with God - we were created for a relationship with God.

I'm always a little leery of stepping into something really controversial, but I'm going to do that today. I don't ever want to disparage anyone, but I just believe that dogs are more God-like than cats. Now I think that with cats all they really see you as is a provider of cat food. You're *Yahweh-Jireh* to them - the God who provides, and that's all they care about. But a dog wants to be in a relationship with you. It runs to meet you at the door, is so excited to see you. It's like he's saying, "He's home! He's home!" It's just a wonderful feeling of being rejoiced in.

I saw this cartoon the other day. I don't know if any of you look at the comic strip Bizarro, but this one is designed to show us that God is probably dog-like, not cat-like. It shows a dog with a crown sitting on an elaborate throne in what is supposed to be heaven, and there's a man with wings - perhaps newly arrived - in front of him. The dog says, "The joyful, loving, eternally-forgiving nature of dogs never tipped you off?"

God is a God who wants to be in a relationship with us. Now how do we know that? We need to understand that the stories in Scripture, the creation narratives in Scripture, are not designed to be stories of science. But they're designed to tell us not how the earth was made and how we were made but rather who made us and why we were made. So, one of the ways we can

do that is by comparing the stories in Scripture of creation with other myths and narratives of creation that were going around at the time of the creation of our Scripture.

For example, the Babylonian creation myth is called *Enuma Elish*, and you might have studied it in anthropology or someplace. It's so interesting because in that story, the many gods that are there are having wars, battles between themselves. And out of this war setting is created the world and people in the world are only there to serve the gods. That's that their only purpose - to serve the gods.

And the gods go on about their business, doing their thing, relating to each other and enjoying each other, fighting, having parties, all these different things. And meanwhile, the human being's sort of live down here to serve them. Boy, that's not the picture we get in the Hebrew Scripture. No, the Hebrew Scripture tell the story of a God who is intimately involved in the lives of the people. Who blesses us in incredible ways. Who makes this incredible garden and says, "You're free to eat of any of the trees - but don't eat of those - there are boundaries. But you're free to eat of any of the trees." Who sees the man in the garden and says, "It's not good that man should be alone. I'll make a partner for him." There's this sense of God's great desire to bless and to love us, to be in relationship with us.

One of the ways you can tell that is that when we sin, the immediate consequence of that sin is that Adam and Eve hide from God in the garden. In other words, there had to be this relationship, this freedom to be together, and that's then broken by the sin in the garden. We are made to be in a relationship—a God who wants, who needs to love us.

Do you remember the movie "Castaway" with Tom Hanks? The story is he's cast onto an island where he has to stay by himself after a plane crash. He has all these things in Fed-Ex boxes that float up. So, he's stranded there, and as all the days and weeks and months go on, he gets more and more lonely. He finds this volleyball, and it has printed on the side of it "Wilson," which is the manufacturer of the ball. He creates a friend out of this volleyball. He calls it "Wilson," that's his friend. There's a scene where the volleyball floats away, and his heart is broken.

See, we are all made to have this incredible desire for relationship. And that's who God is, too. One of the differences between the Babylonian gods, Baal the Canaanite gods is that there were so many of them they hung out with each other. We are monotheistic- we have one God. There is only one God. The most common prayer in the Judea-Christian tradition is called the

Shema, and it goes, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One." There is just one God. So, if God is going to have a relationship, then God's going to create us for that. That's our purpose. We were made to be in relationship with God.

Now here's the third thing. We were made to be a part of creation. The whole of creation and to be stewards of that creation. There are two creation stories, one is in Genesis 1, and the other is in Genesis 2. And in Genesis 1, we call the source - the one who assembled and wrote down that story "E," and that's for the word God because, in Genesis 1, God is referred to as *Elohim*, and we translate as God. In Genesis 2, the source we call "J" which is for the German Jahweh - begins with a J because, in Genesis 2, God is called "The Lord" or "The Lord God." What we see are these two different traditions, two different stories of this. But in both of those two stories, there is this sense in which the human beings - the man and the woman - were put in the garden with a purpose. In Genesis 1, the Scripture says, "That they are to fill the earth and subdue it." And they were given dominion over all of creation. In Genesis 2, it's a little different language, there the Scripture says, "The man was put in the garden to till it and to keep it." I love that picture. To keep it. To sustain it. To be stewards of the world that God owns, but we have been given the responsibility to sustain it.

As we began our worship today, we sang the hymn "This Is My Father's World," and it says, "And to my listening ears, all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres." All of nature is God's - it's "My Father's World."

When I grew up, and I was in high school, we lived out in the country. I loved it out there. You could look up and see the stars every night. When I went away to college, I moved to the big city, and I've lived in the city ever since then. As time goes on and you begin to feel sort of withdrawn from nature. You don't find yourself feeling a part of creation in the same way.

There's a poem I learned when I was younger, and it still spins around in my mind sometimes. It's from the English romantic poet William Wordsworth. It goes like this:

"The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not."

The poem goes on, but that rings true with me. Sometimes I feel that we have stepped out of creation, and we're just sort of watching it, and we're called to step into that creation and see our responsibility to be sustainers of it.

God made us good, in God's image. God made us to be in relationship with God. We were made for that. God made us as part of God's creation and as stewards of it. And finally, there's one more piece that kind of leans us toward what we'll talk about next week. God made us free - God gave us free will. We were created for all of those things. We were made good, we were made for a relationship with God, we were made to be a part of and a steward of creation, but no one forced us to do any of those. We are free to love or not love.

You see, love that's forced is not love at all. If we have no choice but to love, that's not loving. Love implies a choice, and God gave us that choice. To be in a relationship - or not. To be with God - or to turn away. And so, we sin.

We see all those challenges around us, don't we? The consequences of sin. We see the death, we see the divisions, we see the disparities, we see despair.

All those consequences, creation is broken, and God continues to try and fix it and to engage us in that work. It's like the author started writing the story and knows where the story is going to end. It's a happy ending, a resolution that we're looking toward, but because the characters have free will, the author has to continue to chain the details of the story to continue to pull us back toward that place. To move us toward that resolution at the end.

That's what we're going to talk about next week - sin and grace and how God experiences our sin and how grace responds.

Let's pray together. *Most gracious and loving God, we confess to you that we don't always see ourselves in you. When we look in the mirror, we see the sinful part of us, our mistakes, and our failures, our shortcomings. God, show us who you made us to be. Give us a clear understanding of that identity that is just at our very core good and show us how to live out of that. Remind us of our purpose to be in relationship with you, to be stewards of the world that you created. And above all, God, whisper in our ears how much you love us. We pray in the name of your son Jesus Christ, Amen.*