

Creation

Before reading

This is one of the most familiar – and sometimes most fought over passages in scripture. We've read it in worship every four years for probably at least three cycles. The arguments surrounding the passage are centered around scientific explanations about the origin of the universe and pitting those against this creation account.

But science was never the intent of the passage. In the sermon, we'll talk more about what the intent was. The arguments have threatened to tarnish the poetic beauty of the passage. It was likely written to be a part of a liturgy for worship. As we read it, let its poetry draw you in as creation unfolds in front of our eyes.

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

Sermon

There are so many directions we could go with this familiar story. The more I've studied it over the years, the more beautiful it becomes.

I said we'd talk about the intent behind the writing so let's start there. Although this creation story appears first in the Bible, the creation story with Adam and Eve in the garden is an older story.

But this one was written down later for a specific reason. The ancient authors of the Bible had essentially zero interest in writing down something we might call science or history. Their goal was always more about telling of their experience with God.

This newer creation story was likely written during the time of the exile, probably by some of the priests and scribes. So, think about that setting. The last several years have been utter chaos. People of Judah have been killed...cities destroyed. Even Jerusalem and its temple have been destroyed.

The more elite people of Judah – leaders, scholars, craftsman, and so on – have been taken into exile in Babylon. God's chosen people as a nation have become formless and void.

For the ancients, what happened on earth was mirrored by what was happening with the gods. And it sure looked to everyone like Yahweh, the God of Israel, had been defeated by the gods of Babylon.

So this creation story is first a vivid reminder that God can create order, beauty, and function out of utter chaos. God did it before and God can do it again. It's written to bring hope to a people at their lowest point. That can also give us hope in times of chaos.

But it goes further. Let's say a little bit about the Babylonian gods who everyone was so sure won. I've talked about this before, so I'll be brief. Babylon has a creation story too. It's called the Enuma Elish. Often when people hear it, they'll comment on the similarities between that story and this creation story.

But the differences are what's important.

So, the story in a nutshell. In the beginning, there were two seas – the male Apsu, the fresh water sea, and female Tiamat, the salt water sea. They came together and out of that were born gods.

To make a long story short, as there came to be more and more gods, a great war between the gods broke out. Tiamat created a dragon to defeat the gods on the opposing side. The opposing side created Marduk.

Marduk defeated Tiamat's dragon...and in doing so, defeated Tiamat herself. She was split in half and half her body became the heavens and half became the earth.

Out of the bones and scraps of the defeated dragon, humans were made and Marduk breathed life into them. Their purpose? To essentially be slaves to the gods...to do all the hard work so the gods didn't have to. The gods retreated to the heavens and left earth to humans.

The differences are important. In the Babylonian story creation was born out of a violent war. Humans were created out of violence, and specifically violence against the female god. Contrast that to a creation spoken into being...and loved by its creator...a humanity declared very good, both male and female.

Then, the Babylonian gods retreat from the world and leave the humans on their own. Contrast that to a God who remains intimately involved with creation.

Finally, compare the creation and role of humanity. Humans are created, not as some afterthought, created out of scraps because God didn't want to work anymore. Instead, humans were created in God's very own image! That was a complete turnaround compared to Babylon's story.

That's what I want to focus on for the rest of this morning's message. What does it mean to be created in God's image?

The first thing I want to say is that this is what is at our core. We are all created in God's image. Religion became so obsessed with sin that we lose sight of that. Our creation in God's image answers the question for us, who am I, really?

We can't downplay sin and the effects it's had on the world and its creatures...including humans. But I don't believe it's what defines us. You will find those who disagree...who say that without Christ's intervention, original sin is what defines us.

Our answer to that dilemma will help determine how we approach humanity and God. If we see ourselves and others at our core as created in the image of God we'll have a different attitude than if all we can see is a totally depraved humanity.

Christ's accomplishment on the cross is about freeing us from the tangles and chains that sin have placed on us...chains that threaten to choke out that original blessing of creation in God's image. Christ gets us back to what we were created to be. God's image.

So what does it look like to be the image of God? That's the stuff of lots of arguments. But honestly, we can get pretty far just with looking at this passage.

In the ancient world, and really up to the not-so ancient world, kings and occasionally queens were considered to be God's representatives to rule on earth. But in this creation story, all of humanity – both male and female – are given authority to rule the world on God's behalf. To rule like God.

And the rest of the story gives us some clues about how to rule like God.

First, God creates. God tells humans to be fruitful and multiply...to join with God in continuing to create this beautiful world. Part of the command is of course to multiply – to populate.

But being fruitful can look like so many other things. We can be fruitful when we grow crops or gardens or trees or flowers. We can be fruitful when we paint and draw, sing, write music, write books or poetry. We can be fruitful when we care for children, whether our own or not.

We can be fruitful when we tend the sick and work to put the wounded back together, whether their wounds are physical, emotional or spiritual.

We can be fruitful when we build things and learn how to do things in a way that is better for the planet. We can be fruitful when we advocate or work for the poor and create communities of justice and peace. We can be fruitful when we nurture relationships with family or friends. We can be fruitful when we allow others to love us.

Next, God's creation brings order out of chaos. The ultimate chaos is death, and in Christ God defeats death. But even before death, the Spirit in us can work to heal chaotic and toxic situations.

God delights in creation. God calls it good! It's so easy to focus on what's wrong in the world.

But being made in God's image means we can step outside our front door...or go for a walk in the woods or prairie...or gaze out over mountains or seas...or watch the masses of people on the sidewalks in cities...and say man, is this not beautiful or what?!

This is good! Maybe every single day, we can find at least one thing, creature, or person we can delight in.

God blesses. God blesses creation. God blesses humanity. When we bless the world as God does, we are doing the very thing God will later ask of Abraham and Sarah and their family. God blesses us so that through us all the families of the world will be blessed.

And finally, God rests. Being made in God's image truly means we don't have to prove ourselves by working ourselves to death. We don't have to constantly worry we aren't doing enough. We can rest. In fact later on, God will command just that.

You...were created in God's image. Whatever else you might think about yourself, you were created in God's image. You were created to create. You were created to delight, to bless...and to rest.

And in Christ, whatever has happened in your life that threatens that image, you have now been created anew.