

God's Invitation to Learn: Creation
Genesis 1:1-5, 1:26-2:4a
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I love the way the theologian Brian McLaren talks about creation as he begins his book “We Make the Road by Walking”, an overview of the Biblical story:

BIG BANGS AREN'T BORING. Dinosaurs aren't boring. Coral reefs aren't boring. Elephants...[and] hummingbirds aren't boring. And neither are little kids. Evolution isn't boring. Magnetism and electricity aren't boring. $E=MC^2$ might be hard to understand, but it certainly isn't boring. And even glaciers aren't boring, although their dramatic pace is at first quite hard for us to perceive. And God, whatever God is, must not be boring, either, because God's creation is so amazingly wonderfully, surprisingly fascinating.

The first and greatest surprise – a miracle, really – is this: that anything exists at all, and that we get to be part of it. Ripe peach, crisp apple, tall mountain, bright leaves, sparkling water, flying flock, flickering flame, and you and me . . . here, now!

On this, the first pages of the Bible and the best thinking of today's scientists are in full agreement: it all began in the beginning, when space and time, energy and matter, gravity and light, burst or bloomed or banged into being. In light of the Genesis story, we would say that the possibility of this universe overflowed into actuality as God, the Creative Spirit, uttered the original joyful invitation: Let it be! And in response, what happened? Light. Time. Space. Matter. Motion. Sea. Stone. Fish.

Sparrow. You. Me. Enjoying the unspeakable gift and privilege of being here, being alive.

In the beginning, God . . . created the heavens and the earth. Thus says our Scripture reading. That is an affirmation of faith, or better yet, a hymn of praise. It is neither a scientific theory nor a description of how the universe began. Rather than answering the question of how the universe was created, it answers by whom it was created: God.

“We can converse about the universe in scientific terms if we wish,” points out the minister John Rogers. “Indeed, we should do so with confidence and gratitude. We know the universe is millions of years old. Mathematics and astronomy, physics and chemistry, biology and archaeology help us to discover many of its secrets and perhaps to solve problems connected with its origin and evolution. But we do well to remember that there is a difference between a *problem*, which can be solved by greater knowledge, and a *mystery*, which is enhanced by knowledge. The proper response to a problem is hard work, study, research, experiment. The proper response to mystery is wonder, awe, prayer, worship.”

“Take, for example, the problems of birth defects and fatal illness. Many such problems have been . . . are being . . . will be solved by scientific research and medical skill. But the mystery of life remains, and deepens, when we contemplate the birth of a child, or when we live through the death of a loved one. A number of us remember the moon landing. That event represents a solution of the problem of space travel. But do you also remember the picture of earth taken from the moon? . . . the globe on which we live and die and solve our problems, suspended there in the vastness of space? . . . That only sharpened the mystery and wonder of our world.” (Rogers)

The theologian Paul Tillich used to tell with delight of a question asked by his six year old daughter in New York's Central Park one day. "Why," said his daughter, "are trees not not?" Let me translate. In other words, "Why are there trees anyway?" A botanist may someday know all that can be known about *how* trees are there, but no botanist will ever know *why* there is a tree anyway. "Why are trees not not?"

However many problems we may solve, is there anything we know about our world that is more important than these words?:

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters . . . Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;. . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:1-2, 26a, 27)

That is truth which can only be affirmed and sung . . . not explained. The biblical doctrine of creation is not a scientific statement calculated to explain the origin of the world at some datable moment in the cosmic past, or to describe literally the beginning of time. The Genesis picture of God calling the world into being is not a scientific statement about a historical event, but a theological confession about the deepest meaning of existence. The Hebrew word translated here "to create" is a verb that is used only with God as its subject. As if to say, we are dealing here with truth far beyond our ability to explain; but not beyond our capacity to affirm. Yes, it is truth beyond human conceiving, but not beyond our human trust.

“The doctrine of creation...,” wrote British theologian John Whale, “is not a cosmological theory, but an expression of our adoring sense of the transcendent majesty of God, and our utter dependence upon God.” This led the philosopher G. K. Chesterton to comment that the sun does not rise “merely as the result of the earth’s motion. It rises because God says ‘Get up!’”

We often talk at church about how we are to put God first. That’s a good thing to do. But please understand: God is first! By beginning with this song of praise to God who calls the world into being, the Bible says this, I will introduce you to the Wisdom, Grace, Love, Power and Truth . . . the Word back of all created things, undergirding all knowledge, encompassing all of time. You may believe it or not; that is your business. Either way: In the beginning, God.

God, maker of heaven and earth, looked down on all creation, and pronounced it very good. And this same God blesses the human ones created, male and female, giving them “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

What does it mean to have dominion ? What is this responsibility that we have been given by God? Unfortunately, some understand the term to mean humans have the right to run roughshod over the earth, sea, and heavens arguing that since having dominion means to rule, we can do as we please.

But nothing could be further from the truth. The verb translated “to have dominion” appears in the Hebrew Scripture 19 times. In its 17 non-Genesis appearances, it always refers to a human relationship. By the way, there will a test on this! Most frequently, this synonym of “to rule” occurs in the context

of Israel's kings. Thus, this word was used in Genesis with a special meaning. Humans are to be rulers over the earth.

But before we jump to conclusions about a king lording it over his people, please understand what the ancient Israelites expected of their king in relationship to his people. Our answer is found in the royal psalms, which served as part of the worship service when a new Israelite king was crowned. From them, we find what was expected of the ruler. Let me read a portion of one of the royal psalms, Psalm 72 (2,4,14):

“May [the king] judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and ...[have] pity on the weak ..., saving the lives of the needy.”

Thus, we see that the biblical model for the king stresses responsible care for that over which dominion is given, especially the vulnerable. The analogy with our passage in Genesis, I hope, is clear. We humans have dominion, we are the rulers over this earth. Therefore, we humans are to stress responsible care of God's vulnerable creation. As Christians we are to join hands in such an effort with those of no faith and those of other faiths, because to have dominion is a responsibility given to all humans.

We are also to remember that the king in Israel was always God's servant. The royal psalms constantly refer to the king as God's anointed one. As rulers over this earth, we know that humans are ultimately and only servants of God. We never own the earth. The earth and all that is in it belongs to God. As God's royal servants, we are stewards of God's good earth. This is

our responsibility – to be responsible stewards of God’s earth, exercising care for God’s creation.

Yet, some ecological issues are so complex that we are confused and totter near the abyss of despair. Remember, though, that science is a friend, not an enemy, so we can accept the findings of trained scientists and do what we can to exercise responsible care of God’s good creation. Still, what difference can you or I make?

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of a man who was walking along the beach where thousands of starfish had been washed ashore. As he walked further down, he noticed a boy who was walking slowly and stopping often, so he could throw things into the ocean.

As the man got closer he noticed that the boy was picking up one starfish after another and tossing each one gently into the ocean. The man was confused and so asks the boy, “Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” The boy then goes on to explain, “Well the sun is up and the tide is going out, if I don’t throw them out further, they will die.”

Upon hearing this, the man replied, “But, son, don’t you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can’t possibly save them all. Your efforts won’t make a difference at all!”

The boy then bent down to pick up another starfish and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, he said, “It made a difference to *that* one.”

Friends, we are to act as servants of God who are entrusted with responsible stewardship of God’s good creation. As Christians, we act in hope, doing what we can, trusting that God is still at work in creation, and that together, we can make a difference. Amen.

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