

Genesis 1-11

The God of New Beginnings

Chapter 1:1-23

June 26, 2006

Philosopher John Leslie tells the following story. Imagine that you're about to be executed. A group of soldiers wrap a blindfold around your eyes and tie you to a stake. Ten highly trained snipers aim their guns at your chest. The officer barks out, "Ready, aim, fire!" and ten shots ring out. Miraculously, they all miss you. You have survived and you're set free to live. What do you do? Do you shrug your shoulders and say, "Whew, that was a close call! Now I can get on with my life." Of course not. Some explanation is necessary. Why are you alive at all? According to Leslie, there are two options: (1) There are many executions happening today and they just happened to miss you. It was pure luck. (2) The other explanation is that there is more going on than you realized. Perhaps the firing squad – or the captain of the firing squad – wants you to live. It was no accident. You're supposed to be alive for a reason.

Leslie goes on to say that this translates into how we think about the universe. Why are you here? Why is this tiny planet called Earth so incredibly fine-tuned for life? One possibility is that it's just pure chance, good luck or fate. The Nobel Prize-winning biochemist Jacques Monod said, "man at last knows he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he has emerged by chance."

The other possibility is that the universe – including you and me – exists for a purpose, a plan. Perhaps something or someone is for us, working on our behalf. This summer we'll be exploring the God who has a purpose for us from the first book of the Bible - Genesis. Genesis 1 tells us that there is a purpose for our existence. Creation is not careless. It's not just a matter of chance. God has a purpose and a plan for you.

In this first chapter of the Bible we begin to discover who we are and what our purpose is by focusing on God. We often get bogged down in Genesis 1 because we want to answer the question: How did we get here? How did creation happen? Or when did it happen? But the main point of Genesis 1 and 2 is to answer the question: *Who* made it happen? If we merely turn this text into a battleground, we'll miss the personal and passionate call of God to us. What is God like? As we read through Genesis 1 we'll focus on three things about God: the Supremacy of God, the Creativity of God and the Goodness of God.

The Supremacy of God

The Supremacy of God simply means that God is supreme; God is the best, most amazing, most brilliant, most joyful, most just, most fascinating, most righteous and most fun (and, yes, I did say fun!) being in the universe. Another biblical word for this is holy. God is holy, which means that God is in His own class; nothing can compare with God.

That's a major theme running through the story in Genesis 1. Now some people are disappointed when they discover how this theme unfolds in the story of Genesis 1. When I took "Intro. to Religious Studies" at the University of MN, I was surprised to discover that there were other creation stories that were circulating in the ancient Near East. I viewed this – and the teacher encouraged me to view it – as a major threat to my faith. Now I don't see it as a threat at all. The biblical accounts engage with these other stories but on many fronts Genesis offered the world something fresh and life-changing.

First of all, Genesis chapter 1 declares the good and life-giving news that God alone is Supreme. There is no one like the True God. Most of the ancient world worshipped the stars and the sun and the moon. Each of these had their own religious cults and religious practices. The Genesis account bluntly tells us that God is supreme over the stars and sun and moon. On the first day of creation (see verse 3) God creates light before he creates the sun and moon. In other words, from a theological perspective, the story tells us, "God doesn't depend on the sun and moon and stars for light. God is the Source of light so God can light up the world anyway he wants to." Indeed, God creates the sun, moon and stars on the 4th day and he creates plants on the 3rd day. In other words, God can cause plants to grow just by His power. He doesn't need the sun to make things grow.

There's a scene from the movie *ET* that illustrates this idea. In the story *ET*, a gentle extraterrestrial, is an expert at making plants grow. At one point in the film he sees a pot of flowers withered and wilted in a darkened room. So he gazes intently at the plant, widening his eye in intensity, and the plant stands up straight, new color and life infusing each petal of every flower. When he walks away, the flowers are once again in glorious, full bloom.¹

Verse 16 makes the same point. God made the greater light to govern the day (i.e. the sun) and the lesser light to govern the night (i.e. the moon). And then he briefly mentions the stars – "He also made the stars" as if to say, "O, yea, God made the stars too. Yep, no biggie for God. He did it all without breaking a sweat."

One more example of the supremacy of God: verse 21 it refers to "sea monsters" or "the great creatures of the sea." In the Canaanite religious systems these sea monsters were wicked, fearsome and uncontrollable monsters lurking in the universe's closet. To the Babylonians the chaos-monster Tiamet pre-existed all the gods. So when you approached God or the gods you could never rest and trust and know that the Lord is good, as the Bible says (Psalm 100:3-4). That was the last thing you could know for sure about the gods. They were monsters that must be bribed or cajoled and placated. But Genesis 1 says, "So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems." In other words, once again the author says nonchalantly, "O, yea, by the way, those ugly, uncontrollable, fearsome monsters from the sea? Yea, God made those too." Another part of the Bible refers to the same theme and says, "There is the sea ... teeming with creatures beyond number ... and the leviathan (that's the sea monster), which you formed to frolic there" (Psalm 104:25-26).

¹ Adapted from *Remember Creation* by Scott Hoezee, page 18.

Tiamet or Leviathan isn't a monster; in God's sight, he's just like a little kid skipping around the playground.

The story of the Bible doesn't begin with us; it begins by telling us who God is. So verse 1 says, "In the beginning God..." God is the first subject in the Bible, and God is mentioned 35 times in this chapter alone. It's a tip-off that we aren't the center of the universe. In our fallen human nature most of us find this idea repugnant: we want to be the center of our universe and we don't want anyone messing that up. But eventually, when God touches us by His grace, we begin to ask questions like: where does most of my unhappiness come from? Jealousy, envy, anger, hurt feelings, churning discontentment, lust and the insatiable craving for more – where does it all come from? It comes when I put myself at the center of the universe. So God is doing me a huge favor in the first four words in the Bible: "In the beginning God." In other words, "Get over it. You're not the center of the universe. It isn't about you."

The Creativity of God

The key word create (or the Hebrew word *bara*) is repeated three times in verses 1, 21, 27. The word stresses the total freedom and power of the artist to create with boundless and effortless freedom. God doesn't have to create. And it wasn't hard for God to create. As we'll see later in this passage, God delights in His creation. It's fun for God.

Elsewhere in the Bible *bara* is also used when God saves and recreates people and brings them into a new life. So, for instance, in Isaiah 43:19, as God's people languished in exile, it felt like a desert experience. But God promised to save them by saying, "See, I am doing a new thing ... I am making (*bara*) a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." The God who created the heavens and the earth is the same God who wants to create a new beginning in our lives.

Verse 2 – "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." The Hebrew words for formless and empty – *tohu wabohu* suggest a desolate, frightening, empty, howling wasteland or desert. It's the place of judgment and chaos. But God was there – "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." Unlike the gods and goddesses of the ancient myths, the God of the Bible isn't detached. He hovers or broods over the earth – the same Hebrew word is used in Deuteronomy 32:11 to describe the fluttering of a mother eagle stirring its young to flight. What a beautiful picture of God's heart for his creation. God loves to make things ordered and beautiful. That's who God is. Do you ever get the sense that your life or the world around you is marked by chaos, by confusion, by disorder and ugliness? God delights to make things new and beautiful in our lives. He hovers over your darkness and confusion and says, "Let there be light. Let there be new life. Let there be beauty."

Verse 3 begins the pattern of creation. As you read through this chapter you'll notice the pattern, the symmetry, the order and design. The story is structured around the theme of one week of six days in the following pattern:

- ❖ time: *there was evening and morning ...*
- ❖ command: *God said, "Let there be..."*
- ❖ result: *And it was so ...*
- ❖ Assessment: *God saw that it was good ...*
- ❖ Time: *there was evening and morning ...*

The entire creation story, which gradually increases in complexity, gives a sense of order and beauty. And God has placed within the created order a way to keep life going. The universe is empowered to *bring forth* what is proper to it. Literally verse 11 says, "Let the earth vegetate vegetation, herb seed seeding, fruit tree making fruit after its kind." Both plants and animals are given the power to reproduce and keep life going. God has woven together the supernatural and the natural. They both exist and blend together as part of God's creation. The power of creation is at work even when we rest and sleep. It doesn't depend on us. We act like it does: if we don't fix it all, control it all, conquer it all, subdue it all, then God is helpless. No, there is something built into the universe: God's power and creativity keep working without us. This makes all kinds of things possible for human beings: prayer, solitude, rest, Sabbath, celebration, play. We can trust God to do His part.

Verse 4 tells us something else about this pattern and order – God separated the light from the darkness. The word separated doesn't mean to pull apart; rather it means "to assign each to its respective sphere or slot." Think of separate the next time the NY Yankees play the Boston Red Sox. First, the players are separated from the fans. Then the players are separated into two distinct teams. Then the players on each team are separated into different positions. Everything belongs. Without separation you'd have chaos, the *tohu wabohu* mentioned in verse 2. It's an important word that's used five times in this chapter. When God creates there is a separation towards order: light from darkness, waters above from waters below, day from night, woman from man. When we begin to tinker with what God has separated, we slide back into chaos and disintegration, into the *tohu wabohu*.

One more thing: The Genesis account puts the stuff of creation into categories – the phrase *according to their kinds* appears over and over again. Notice that all of God's activity mentioned in Genesis isn't far from the scientific quest. The entire quest of science depends on an ordered world in which patterns can be discovered and categories established. One of the biggest questions of science is simply this: "Why can we do science at all? Where do we get this marvelous power to understand things? Or why is the world so understandable?"² Science rests on all of these questions. Albert Einstein claimed that the only incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it's comprehensible. Why can we figure it out?

According to Genesis, we can understand and study and draw conclusions about the world around us because God created the world with structure and order. Of course this doesn't *prove* this existence of God. It merely shows that, according to the Biblical story,

² From *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity* by Dr. John Polkinghorne, pages 22 and 23.

the scientific quest and the God-quest are not mutually incompatible. Dr. John Polkinghorne put it this way: “Many people seem to think that faith involves shutting one’s eyes, gritting one’s teeth, and believing six impossible things before breakfast, because the Bible or the Pope or some other unquestionable authority tells us so. Not at all! Faith may involve a leap, but it’s a leap into the light, not the dark. The aim of the religious quest, like that of the scientific quest, is to seek motivated belief about what is the case ... Religion can only be of real value if it’s actually true. It’s not a technique for whistling in the dark to keep our spirits up.”³

The Goodness of God

God delights in his creation. Notice how many times God pauses and declares the delight and satisfaction of His created work: verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25. And then in verse 31 God sees the entire work of art and he declares that this is “very good” – literally translated as lovely, pleasing or beautiful. Then three times it says, “God blessed” (see verses 22 – the living creatures; verse 28- human beings; verse 2:4 – Sabbath). God is a God of blessing. From the very first chapter in the Bible we see something about the fundamental nature and character of God – God is gracious. God loves to bless. Genesis is a story of blessing. God also delights and enjoys and revels in His creation. We find a happy God.

On a very small scale, you and I know something of this sense of delight in creating. You and I don’t create from nothing – we always use pre-existing stuff – but we do create. For instance, when I make mulligatawny or Cinnamon rolls – I have a sense of joy and delight. You are a maker of something. God has also given us a taste of this same feeling of delight.

Until I was 16 years old I always thought that God was basically a cosmic killjoy, a boring, grey, lifeless being who was only interested in subtracting from life, never pouring out blessing and life. I was angry at this God. I wanted to avoid this God. Then I started reading the Bible and it didn’t take my fear away – in a way, it actually increased my fear. I met Jesus and I found true holiness. I watched as tough, grown men fell on their knees and worshipped him. People were afraid of Jesus, threatened by him – so much so, that they eventually had to kill him. But I saw something else in Jesus: a good heart, a pure heart, a God that was for me. The Bible kept saying “for our sakes” or “for our sins” Christ lived and died for our sins. He even became a curse for us. As I watched Jesus, something awakened in me. I wanted to know this God. But how? A friend open the Bible and outline the story: we were lost and separated; Christ came to bring us back; died for our sin; receive it. New beginning.

Now nearly thirty years later as I read Genesis chapter 1, it nearly took my breath away again. I had to stand back with wide-eyed amazement and realize afresh how enormous and grand the Gospel is. A little advice about religion? Some help to make it through the week? Having our sins forgiven? Yes, but so much more! It is the message, the story of the God of beginnings and the God of new beginnings. It is the message of a God of

³ See Polkinghorne, page 10.

power, creativity and goodness. It is the message of redemption and restoration. The God of creation can begin to recreate your life.

My friend Ken who is serving in the army in Afghanistan wrote me again this week: “Lately, redemption has been on my mind,” he said. “I was reading the best car magazine ever, Sport Compact Car. I have this obsession with rice rockets, little import cars with insanely large turbos and modified engines. Flipping through my magazines I am filled with hope and dreams of my own project car. But my favorite stories are ones where the cars have been salvaged from rust and ruin, and made into show-winning tuners. It reminds me of Jesus. Where others see a rusty, broken vehicle, a true tuner will see hidden potential. And when Jesus sees me, does he see a broken down man or something more? Redemption is like working on a project car. Jesus is the mechanic and I am the busted junker that needs repairing.”

To open your heart to the Living Jesus means that you open your heart to the fullness of God – the God of supremacy and creativity and goodness. It means that the freshness and newness and power of God become available to you today. My brothers and sisters in Christ, this is breathtaking good news!