

Genesis 1-11

The Story of a *Beautiful* Mess

Chapter 1:24-31

July 9, 2006

In one of my favorite books, *Stories for Children* by the great Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, one of the characters says, “When a day is done it is no longer there. What remains of it? Nothing more than a story. If stories weren’t told ... man would live like the beasts ... Today we live, but by tomorrow today will be a story. The whole world, all human life, is one long story.” I love that because I love stories – and you do too. As human beings we have an unquenchable curiosity to tell and hear stories and to understand the story we’re a part of. The Bible, especially the stories in Genesis, describes our story as human beings. It is your story and my story. It’s the story we belong to. I’m calling this sermon series “Basic: the Stories that Started it All.” And we’re exploring a story that may seem basic to some of us, but it’s a story that needs to be told and clarified again and again – or we’ll forget who we are.

In chapter 1 on Genesis the first 23 verses have recorded an almost breathless pace of creation. Now the story slows down; there’s a solemn drum roll as we await the grand finale starting in verse 26. Read verses 26-27. “Let us make man in our own image, in our likeness?” Throughout the ages Christians have said, “Well, the image of God means that we can reason and think. No, no it means that we can feel. Or it means that we can communicate and God communicates with us. Or it means that we have a soul and not just a body. All of these may be partially true, but notice that it’s not just that we *have* the image and likeness of God; we *are* the image of God.

Genesis was originally written in Hebrew and much later translated into Greek. The Hebrew word for image is *tselem* and the Greek word for image is *Eikon*. We have some idea what an eikon is – you have icons on your computer screen. An icon is an image for something else; it represents something. So when you click the icon for Windows, it leads you to the real screen for Windows. In the same way, human beings are icons for the Living God. We represent God. We receive and reflect the glory of God.

Or perhaps we could look at it this way. **(Hold up a large mirror).** Just as a mirror receives and reflects an image or a face, so we were made to reflect the “face,” the character, the image and likeness of God. So when you treat someone with kindness, you’re reflecting the kindness of the Living God. When you react with anger at the sight of injustice, we see a reflection of God’s passion for justice. When you move in strength and creativity ... When you react with tenderness and compassion ... God has made us to be the mirror of creation: we receive and reflect His glory and goodness. But of course all of this depends on one word: relationship. It’s only when we are rightly related to God and to one another that we truly reflect the image and likeness of God.

Now in one sense this we could say that the entire message of the Bible is captured in this little phrase “made in the image and likeness of God.” The “Gospel” or the good news is

a story that goes like this: The Triune God creates us in His image and likeness. We are glorious creatures because we are made to reflect His glory. But, as we all know so well, we are also cracked and flawed images. We are broken Eikons of God. Life has a way of shattering us. **(Smash the mirror with a hammer).** We are a broken image. We see the story of human brokenness, the mess of humanity, everywhere: the newspaper, our communities, our families, our marriages, our genetic makeup and in the depths of our hearts. You fight the brokenness every day of your life.

But the Gospel, God's good news in Jesus, says that we are being restored through the work of Christ in our lives. On three occasions the New Testament says that Jesus Christ is the Eikon of God (see Colossians 1:15 – *“He is the image – or eikon - of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”* Hebrews 1:3 – *“(Jesus) is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation – or eikon - of God's being...”* And see 2 Corinthians 4:4 – *“...Christ, who is the image – or eikon - of God.”*). Jesus is the perfect Eikon of God's glory. He was and is the only non-broken Eikon in the universe. And when we come to faith in him, through His death on the cross we get our sins forgiven; and through His resurrection power he begins to remake us in His image. He creates a community of broken eikons who are gradually, receiving and reflecting the glory of God. We're getting pieced back together by a good and glorious Redeemer named Jesus. That's the point of our second Scripture reading – Ephesians 4:22-24.

So this morning I want to focus not on our brokenness; I want to focus on our high and holy calling to be image-bearers of the Living God. The story of human beings and the story of your life should take your breath away: in Christ we become fellow image-bearers of God. We are the cracked pieces that come together to shine forth the beauty and glory of God.

Notice how thoroughly unique and wonderful the Biblical message is: every human being on the face of the planet is part of a much bigger story: you were made to receive and reflect God's glory, to be remade in the image of Christ. Does this make a difference in the way we live our lives? Absolutely! Here's where we get back to some very basic affirmations of our faith: the sanctity of life, namely, that as God's image bearers, we all have dignity, value and worth. What is a human being worth and why are you worth that? This past week pro basketball player LeBaron James pondered if he's worth more than the \$80 million he was offered. What are you worth? If you die and they sell all your body parts – dividing it into 130 pieces of body tissue that can be extracted, sterilized and put on the Market – you'll be worth \$80,000. According to a number of studies, you're worth 10% more – in terms of salary – if you're good looking. In all of these scenarios – and in thousands more in our world today - your worth depends on your usefulness. As long as you're successful, smart, healthy, beautiful, athletic or morally upright you're worth more to society.

The Bible has a radically different view: it's called the sanctity of human life and it means every human being, from conception to death, apart from performance and productivity and efficiency and beauty and usefulness, possesses dignity and even glory and honor because we are made in the image and likeness of God (see Psalm 8:5 – most

people are surprised to find this idea in the Bible). And you can view yourself with dignity and honor and you can start to treat every human being on this planet - mean people, disabled people, unborn people, old people, fat people, skinny people, rich and poor people – with dignity and value because God said so.

“Well,” you might say, “that’s so obvious.” Not anymore. My brothers and sisters in Christ, our culture is in the midst of a horrific struggle right now, a struggle of ideas and practices that are already eroding the foundation of the sanctity of life. This past year I picked up a copy of the 35th Anniversary edition of a magazine called *Foreign Policy* and read an article called “Here Today Gone Tomorrow” about “16 ideas that are on their way out.” What ideas are on the way out? The very first one on their list is “the sanctity of human life.” Here’s what Peter Singer, a prolific author and philosophy professor at Princeton had to say: “During the next 35 years, the traditional view of the sanctity of human life will collapse under pressure from scientific, technological and demographic developments. By 2040, it may be that only a rump of hard-core, know-nothing religious fundamentalists will defend the view that every human life, from conception to death, is sacrosanct.”

I guess we have two options: (1) Go with the flow of reason and progress or (2) Join the “know-nothing religious fundamentalists” who believe in the sanctity of human life. And if you go with option 2 you’ll become the rump or butt of society. Personally, I don’t want to be a “know-nothing religious fundamentalist,” I don’t want to be the world’s behind, but on the other hand, we’re called to be counter-cultural, we’re called to be a unique people, a people set apart, a people who shine light into the culture because we’re different – radically and refreshingly different. Christians can’t avoid this issue. It’s too important. As Christians we keep saying, “I have value. I am loved because God made me. God fashioned me. It wasn’t an accident. I don’t have to be skinnier. I don’t have to be better or stronger or richer.” O, if we could just know and believe and rest in this truth! How it would heal our restlessness, our chronic anxiety, our need to prove ourselves, our eating disorders, our cutting, our addictions, our rage and bitterness. If we could just rest in the truth that the Living God has lovingly fashioned me with his fatherly hand of mercy and through Christ I belong to Him. If that could only be my story and your story!

And if only we could treat others this way by saying, “You are valuable because God made you. You don’t have to perform for me. You are an image-bearer of God.” That’s why Christians fight with passion to preserve the dignity, the sacredness of every human being. Listen to this description of the Messiah-King in Psalm 72 (see verses 2, 4 and 12-14). I don’t really care which political party you belong to – Democrat, Republican, Reformed, or whatever – but as a follower of the Living God and the Risen Christ this has to be on our platform.

Now notice something else about the story that shapes us. Read verse 27. Notice that the image of God is always connected to relationships – “male and female he created them.” In other words, you never do this alone. God always calls a community. God’s glory is reflected in a community of people. It doesn’t just happen with one person; it doesn’t

just happen with one gender. It takes a village, a particular village called a church, to be the image of God.

Notice something else about *how* God made them – “I made them male and female.” Did you hear that? We’re different and that’s good. It’s good to be different. It’s good to go outside your gender. I’ve been married almost 23 years and it never ceases to amaze me exactly how different we are. It never ceases to amaze me how different my daughter is from my sons. My daughter has an adventurous, daring spirit. We have many pictures of her swinging wildly in the air with her mouth wide open with a boisterous scream. She has courage and strength. But then my boys came along and they started to display a different kind of adventurous spirit. We had this rule that none of our children would ever, ever have guns or swords, so we banned them from our home ... until our boys started walking around with twigs, sticks and finally huge tree limbs, sharpened with kitchen knives and stuffed into their shorts. They wanted to defend their house and they were willing to kill the local black bear if he came too close to our rabbit pen. Meanwhile our daughter was dressing up the boy rabbit and the girl rabbit and getting them ready for a wedding (which she even asked me to officiate at).

I have no intention to get into the social sciences and the studies of male and female brain anatomy; I just want to say what Genesis says: male and female ... “Yes,” God says, “I like them both and I like them different.” Men, you don’t have to carry sticks or kill black bears; just love being a man. And because you’re a man, love your wife and your daughter and your sisters in Christ and all the women on the face of the earth. Love and protect them – not because they’re inferior but because they are different and God honors their difference. Enjoy the mystery of woman – and I do mean “mystery” because there are some things that you’ll never understand about a woman, but that’s a good thing. Enjoy the mystery. Women, love to be a woman. It’s a glorious thing to be made in God’s image as a woman. And as a woman, honor and love the value of a man made in the image of God. In some ways in our culture, it’s almost become fashionable to bash men, to ridicule men. Never, never fall into that! Love your men. Honor your men because it’s a glorious thing to see a man made in the image of God.

Verse 28 is what’s called the cultural mandate. This doesn’t define the nature of an image-bearer; it describes what an image-bearer does. In other words, because we are made in God’s image as male and female, this is what we do. We create, establish, build, maintain and expand culture. It begins with the blessing of God, but notice that even before God blessed us, He blessed the animals in verse 22. We’re not the only species that God blesses. We won’t get into this today, but keep in mind that the Bible charges us to be stewards of the earth. Christians should take the lead in caring for all of God’s creation.

But what does it mean that God blesses humanity? Some of you know this instinctively because you experienced blessing from your parents. Some of you were not blessed by your parents so this seems strange and distant idea. Blessing means that God loves to say good things to us. It means that God is for us and not against us. Blessing means that God wants you to thrive (see Ezekiel 16 – “live”). The German philosopher Josef Pieper

once said that the essence of love and blessing is to say and live the following message: “It’s good that you’re here.” Think about it. That sounds so simple, but it’s not. That is the essence of love – it’s good that you’re here – not because you meet my needs or perform or make me feel good but simply because you are you. Again, this sounds so basic, but do you know how our homes and our marriages and our children and our communities would be transformed if we could simply receive and then reflect the blessing of God.

Then notice what God tells them to do first, “Be fruitful and increase in number.” You don’t need to be a biblical scholar to figure out what this means: have babies. Go, get married, have sex and have babies, lots of babies. Babies are good. The process of having babies is good. Go for it. Do you love children? Unfortunately, sometimes we seem a little ambivalent about children. We love them, we embrace them but then we add the fine print: as long as they’re healthy (no one wants defective babies); as long as they don’t cramp our style too much; as long as they can stay busy little overachievers who outperform us; as long as we can feel good about their success; as long as I don’t have to work in the church nursery. Children are a blessing from the Lord (see Psalm 127:3). They aren’t a blessing because they perform or achieve – they are a blessing, period.

We’re here to build a new society, a radical new way of doing life and one thing that should be radically different about us is our commitment to hospitality. The church is the God-bought, Jesus-renewed, Spirit-filled group of people who keep telling the world, “Hey, you’re a newborn child? Come on in. Hey, you’re a six-week old fetus? Come on in. Hey, you’re a pregnant, single mother who has no place to go. Come on in. Hey, you’re a recovering drug addict. Come on in. Hey, you’re struggling with homosexuality. Come on in. Hey, you’re a broken image of God, join the club.” That’s what the church does. We welcome broken images.

Then verse 28 – “Rule over the fish of the sea and the bird of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” The parallel verse is found in chapter 2:9 and 15. In other words, God looked over this beautiful world and he told us as his image-bearers; “It’s yours – not yours to destroy but yours to care for. All of it is yours. Build it. Protect it. Create it. Finish it. Everything comes under our rule – not just the animals and the plants but literally everything becomes a means to bring forth the goodness of God, to receive and reflect the goodness and glory of God. God made us to make culture. Bring order out of chaos. Music, art, medicine, research, film, stories, beauty, landscaping, computer technology, homes, lighting – all of it becomes under our rule to make beauty, to bring order out of chaos for the glory of God.

As followers of Christ we have tended to reject culture or embrace culture, flee from culture or be consumed by culture. God tells us to let neither happen to us. Rule the earth. Don’t just wait until you get to heaven – as wonderful as that is! Rule the earth now. Stay and live and breathe new life all around you.

A personal story: my friend Greg Barron and his mission to spread the message of DREAM around the world.

I love what author John Eldredge said: “When was the last time someone inquired about the reason for the hope that lies within you? You’re at the market, in the frozen food section. A friend you haven’t seen for some time comes up to you, grasps you by the shoulders, and pleads, “Please, you’ve got to tell me ... How can you live with such hope? Where does it all come from? I must know the reason ... People aren’t exactly ripping the roofs off churches to get inside. We see the (Devil’s) ploy: drain all the life and beauty and adventure away from the Gospel, bury Christians in duty, and nobody will want to take a closer look.”

Let’s not buy it. Let’s live counter-cultural lives. Our God can bring order out of chaos and life out of death. Our God can transfer people from the Kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Our God can restore the broken image and make all things new. Our God can take cracked Eikons like you - and I don’t care how cracked you may think you are (and maybe you think that you are literally cracking up) – God can put them back together again. If you’re a Christian, this is your life. You’ve been blessed by a good and powerful God. Through the cross of Jesus, God can forgive your sins; through the resurrection power of Jesus he can restore the cracked image of God in you. The Holy Spirit dwells within you. You were made to rule. We should be the most creative, intriguing, daring, adventurous, fully alive people on the face of this planet. When people look at us they should say, “Tell me more about that Jesus of yours.”