

# Genesis 1- 11

## The Gift of Creativity

Chapter 2:4-17

July 23, 2006

He started composing music when he was six years old. Three years later he produced a symphony; and in another three years he wrote his first opera. His more than 600 musical compositions have been called “a magic mirror” that reflect almost every kind of Western music. Music critics use the words “magical” and “miraculous” to describe his creative genius. His name? Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. And although he died at the age of 36 there is a sense of completeness to his work. According to one music critic, “It is hard to believe that there could have been more ... How could you ask more of a miracle?”

It's easy to think of Mozart as a creative person. *Of course he's creative*, you might say. *He was smart – no, he was a genius – he was musical, talented and gifted.* Based on that definition of creativity, most of us wouldn't call our gifts or our lives “creative.” *Creativity is for artists and I'm not an artist. Creativity is for an elite group of people and I'm not part of that elite club. Creativity is reserved for narrow, specialized fields like music, painting or writing essays or poems – and I'm just a \_\_\_\_\_ (mechanic, nurse, teacher, doctor, shoe salesman, retired person, housewife, etc).*

The opening two chapters of the Bible would disagree with this assumption and its low view of our creativity. The Bible proclaims that creativity isn't just an exotic luxury granted to an “artistic elite.” Instead, creativity is woven into every human being on this planet because our God is a creative God. And as those who have been made in God's image and likeness, redeemed by Christ who is renewing the image of God in us, we are called to delight in God's creativity and then to live lives of remarkable creativity.

The Bible begins with these very simple words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In Genesis chapter 2 verse 4 Now in chapter 2 verse 4 we begin what some people believe is an entirely different creation story. Actually, it's much more like looking at the same story from two different perspectives. Genesis 1 views creation through a wide-angle lens. We get the big picture. Then Genesis 2 is like looking at creation through a zoom lens. Notice that chapter 1 begins with “God made the *heavens* and the earth.” Now Genesis 2 reverses the order – “When the Lord God made the *earth* and the heavens.” Chapter 2 starts with the earth, especially those earthlings called human beings. Genesis 1 begins with the majesty of God who creates out of nothing; God speaks and it's done. Genesis 2 begins with the intimacy of a God who personally shapes us, breathes life into us and calls us to live as a bold and creative artist.

## *God is the author of creativity*

Where does creativity come from? The whole story of creation has been declaring that God alone is the author of creativity. The key word in the Bible for God's creativity is the Hebrew word *bara*, a word that's never used for our creative activity. We do not *bara* anything; only God truly creates. We are always what J.R.R. Tolkien called "sub-creators." We're like sub-contractors: the big job belongs to the contractors and we wouldn't even have a job without the contractor. All of our creativity and artistry flows from God's creativity and artistry.

Notice the two key words in verse 7:

- Formed = also translated as crafted. The Hebrew word is *yasar* which means to shape or craft. It referred to the work of a potter (see Jeremiah 18:2ff. – "Like clay in the hand of a potter, so are you in my hand, o House of Israel"). Elsewhere in the Bible it's used for a creative, inventive activity that requires planning (see Isaiah 44:9-10) and skill (such as in Psalm 94:9 where the same word refers to forming the human eye). God is personally, intimately, carefully involved in His creative activity. In Genesis 1 God stood at a distance and just spoke the word and it was so. Now in Genesis 2 we find a God who has mud on his hands, a God who is as close as a potter is to his clay. God shapes us into life.
- Breathed = The word for breath suggests a good, solid puff that would revive a fire as in Isaiah 54:16 where God is the one "who fans the coals into flame." Notice how close and personal this is: it has the intimacy of a kiss. In some cultures of the ancient world (i.e. Egypt) young royalty, the children of the kings and mighty rulers, would receive the breath of life, signifying that they were special and called to a bold and creative life. But in Genesis God makes all humanity in His image and likeness. In other words, we're all royalty (as we'll see in a few weeks, we are fallen and broken royalty, but we never lose our status as made in the image and likeness of God with God's breath breathed into us).<sup>1</sup>

The first time we encounter God in the Bible He isn't the awesome Lawgiver or Judge; God is an artist, a potter who forms, shapes and makes things. Real creativity belongs to God alone.

Let me just pause and ask a few questions: Have you ever stood in wonder and just enjoyed God's creativity? Let me give you a few examples of God's creativity:

- Think of the variety of God's creative stamp in the created world. About twenty years ago scientists estimated that there were up to 10 million different species of living plants and animals – 35,000 species of orchids, 59 kinds of eagles, 170

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<sup>1</sup> We could also compare this with the rival creation accounts that were circulating around the same time as the Book of Genesis. In the story called *Enuma Elish* humans are created from dust and the blood of a murdered, rebellious god. In another story called *Atrahasis* humans were made to replace the lower gods so we could dig ditches for the gods. In contrast, the Genesis account says that although we're made from the dust of the earth, we have also been skillfully and beautifully fashioned by God who has good purposes for us. And even more, we stand in special relationship with a God who is so close he can blow new life into our lungs.

species of marsupials including 50 kinds of kangaroos, 200 species of turtles, and 8,000 species of beetles.

- We could also explore micro-marvels like superstrings and photons and H<sub>2</sub>O or every one of the 100 trillion cells in your body, each of which operates like a complex city and stores more pieces of information than all 30 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica. We could also explore the DNA in every cell of your body. Or we could explore macro-marvels like the solar system or pulsars and supernovas.<sup>2</sup>
- This past Sunday my wife and I went to West Meadow Beach at sunset. It's a mile from our house and it exudes God's creativity. While we were there it was low tide and there were a few hundred birds standing in the low water ...

When do you stop to enjoy, to delight in, and then to praise God for His incredible creativity?

### *God is the author of beauty*

God is also the Author of Beauty. Read verse 9. Why would God make something that is "pleasing to the eye and good for food." The second part of that description makes sense: everyone needs trees that are good for food. But what's the purpose of "pleasing to the eye?" Why do we need beauty? Isn't beauty just something reserved for "artists" and people who have too much time on their hands? Who cares if something is beautiful? We just want to know: Does it work? Is it fast? Is it efficient? Does it get the job done? Beauty is optional. Beauty is a waste of time. Let's just get the job done and get it done quickly. Unfortunately, that attitude loses touch with the God of beauty we find in Genesis 1. God is beautiful and delights in beauty and God wants us to delight in His beauty.

Notice also verses 10-14. Most Bible commentators immediately jump to an analytical question: What's the location of these verses? But the thrust of these verses is to point to beauty. The author seems to be saying, "Look at these four rivers, watering the garden and flowing from Eden and then separating into four headwaters. And (see verse 11) there's gold and it's beautiful." Rivers are often beautiful and God delights in beauty.

If you still don't believe that God is the author of beauty keep reading your Bible until you arrive at the end of the second book of the Bible – Exodus chapter 25. For nearly fifteen chapters it describes in minute detail the plan for the tabernacle, the place of

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<sup>2</sup> In her Pulitzer-prize winning book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard records her year-long explorations on God's creativity on a tiny plot of land known as Tinker Creek. At one point her mind flares with the power of God's creativity: *Of all known forms of life, only about ten percent are still living today ... Why so many forms (of life)? Why not just one hydrogen atom? The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another ... with an exuberance that would seem to be unwarranted, and with an abandoned energy sprung from an unfathomable font ... it all flows so freely wild ... it all surges in such a free, fringed tangle. Freedom is the world's water and weather, the world's nourishment freely given, its soil and sap: and the creator loves pizzazz.* That's so amazing and so theologically accurate: God loves pizzazz!

worship. I was reading it just this last week (Exodus 25:8-9). At first I thought: this is beyond a doubt one of the most boring pieces of literature I have ever read. But then it hit me: Look at how God cares for beauty! (Exodus 25:23-24, 31; 26:1, 6-7) The tabernacle contained every type of visual art: painting, woodworking, sculpting, weaving, metal-work, ceramics and more. And God cares about every detail – even the details about the precious metal for the post sockets and the way the knots are to be tied.

Beauty and creativity can lead us to worship and awe and wonder in God’s presence. There are different kinds of beauty: beauty of form; beauty of ideas; beauty of sound; beauty of writing; beauty of relationships, see Psalm 133:1; beauty of design and interior decorating; beauty of movement (as in dance and sport, no wonder soccer is” the beautiful game”); beauty of sight and sound and smell and taste.

Genesis 1 is the starting point for thinking Christianly about artistic creativity. God is introduced as a creative artist. But notice how God’s creativity continues through the Biblical story. To an infinite God there are an infinite number of possible ways to deal with a fallen humanity – just leave us alone, send a letter, write messages in the sky; instead, God chose the way of Incarnation, the way of personal involvement by becoming a human being. Jesus was born in an unpredictable way, he lived an unforgettable life. When he healed people he almost never used the same method or technique. Each person was unique. Notice the creativity of Jesus’ teaching methods – the stories, the object lessons. And then the cross itself is a work of incredible creative power. How did God transform an instrument of death and hopelessness and cruelty – i.e. the cross or a Roman crucifixion – into the symbol for our salvation? Among everything else it is and stands for, the cross of Jesus is also a sign of the creative power and redemption of the Living God.

As those who have been touched by the Risen Christ, God’s word tells us: enjoy beauty, taste beauty, enter beauty, admire beauty – and then let it lead you to the Author of Beauty. Is beauty useless? Is it a waste of time? Absolutely not. God is the author of creativity and beauty.

### *God calls us to a life of creativity and beauty*

And because God is a God of creativity and beauty, God calls us to a life of creativity and beauty. At the end of Genesis 1 we heard the astounding words that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Notice the key words:

- v26 “Rule over” which means to exercise loving authority over God’s creation. Notice it’s God’s creation – i.e. it isn’t ours, it doesn’t belong to us. Our ruling over is a call to care and to act as stewards of God’s good creation.
- v28 “Subdue it” which means to take control of it, or as we might say, to whip it into shape.

Now notice verses 8 and 15. The man is placed in this beautiful garden and God tells him, “You’re in charge. Take care of it. Make it grow. Keep it beautiful. Be creative.” It is a summons to open-ended creativity. “Cultivate and protect,” God says. The word “cultivate” literally means to dress or to serve. Our creativity is in service. True artists

are not masters; they are servants of the Living God. The second word “Protect” means to keep as in to exercise great care over.

Notice that there are a few qualifiers or restrictions: First, Adam isn’t an unlimited creature. Notice v7 - “the Lord God formed man from the *dust of the ground*.” We are made in the image and likeness of God, we’ve been called to a creative life, but we’re also made from the dust. We’re not angels. *Adam* is part of the *dama* or Hebrew for ground. We’re grounded beings. We have limitations (i.e. the Sabbath). We don’t like limits, but the Bible says, “Limits are good. Limits remind us how God created us.”

There also another qualification in verse 17. The knowledge of good and evil represents the authority to determine right from wrong, good from evil, wisdom from folly. Who decides what’s right and what’s wrong? Does God decide good and evil, right from wrong and then we receive them as God has defined reality? Or do we decide? The Bible constantly tells us the story of a good God who knows what’s best for us. And this good God keeps telling us, “Look, trust me on this one. I know what’s best. Take my word for it.” It’s sort of like when our parents told us things like, “Don’t stick your finger in that light socket. Don’t put your hand on that hot stove. Don’t drink that anti-freeze. It’s not good for you. Trust us on this one.” Of course we grow up with at least a tinge of cynicism towards authority figures because our parents also told us things like, “Don’t climb that tree or you’ll fall and break your neck.” But we didn’t break our necks. Or they would say, “Don’t play with that; you’ll poke your brother’s eye out,” but our brother still has both eyes. But God says, “Your parents we’re a mixture of good and evil, but I’m pure goodness, holy goodness and love. Take my word for it.” But in the Bible’s story of the human race we keep telling God, “No, thanks for your perspective, God, but I know more than you about life.” And then we go ahead and stick our finger in the light socket and drink the anti-freeze that poisons us. That’s exactly what happens in the next chapter in this story when the man and woman ignore God and eat from the tree of good and evil. They take charge of morality and leave God out of the picture. So God says, “Stay away from this. Receive good and evil as I define them, not you.”

So God says, “You’re made from dust. You have limitations. And obey me, trust me, take my word for it,” but other than those two qualifications, the freedom God gives Adam is simply staggering. Notice verse 16. Most of us catch the “you must not” in verse 17 but we fail to hear the “You are free” in verse 16. You are free to eat. You are free to move about; you are free to create; you are free to cultivate. God definitely has restrictions but behind every restriction is a freedom. Adam has the run of the house.

Notice the freedom that God grants to Adam in verses 19-20. By giving names to the animals, Adam is ruling over them, caring and tending the animals. Now the amazing thing about this is that God gives him full reign. “He brought them to the man ... and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.” Did you hear that? God gives freedom to Adam to exercise creativity and authority. God didn’t constantly interrupt and control and critique Adam, “Hippopotamus? What kind of name is that? Gecko? Are you crazy? That’s no gecko, Adam. Dummy!”

In the same way, God calls us to live lives of remarkable creativity. You were made in the image and likeness of God, knit together by a good God while you were in your mother's womb (Psalm 139:13-16). You've been bought by the blood of Christ and through Him you've become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are called to be a community that encourages and enhances one another's creativity. I would venture to say that most of us don't live creative lives either because (a) we've lost touch with the God revealed in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, who is, by the way, the same God revealed in Jesus Christ or (2) we're afraid of failure. We're afraid someone might critique us or condemn us. This kind of thing happens all the time. Listen to these words from a professor at Yale, "The concept is interesting and well-formed, but in order to earn better than a 'C,' the idea must be feasible." The concept was Fred Smith's idea to start a reliable overnight delivery system. You know it as Federal Express. It's no wonder we say things like, "O, I couldn't possibly do that or try that. I might fail. Or God might be angry with me. Or it might not turn out perfect. Or people may criticize me."

So basically we have two options: (1) We can live as the church, that mighty force in history, planted on this plot of land in this period of time, a mighty force that can knock down the gates of hell; we can live as the bride and body of Christ, a powerful movement of humble, blood-bought, but also bold and creative artists who are moving in the power of the Holy Spirit, standing with the Risen Christ who conquered sin and death and hell, being a force in our culture, using all of our creative gifts to draw men and women to the beauty and creativity of the Living God, living our whole lives with a passionate desire to know Christ and make Him known. Or (2) we can become timid, fearful, resigned people who just try to maintain the status quo, hanging on until Jesus comes and leave all this creativity and beauty fluff to Hollywood and Disney.

Again, don't say, "I'm just not the creative type." Think of the areas of our life that call forth our creativity: Worship, relationships, ministry, your job, sharing your faith, perhaps some special activity that God has laid on your heart (i.e. writing or music or a ministry or \_\_\_\_\_).

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let's enjoy and adore and delight in God's creativity and beauty. And let me say, if you don't know this God of creation and new creation that we've been worshipping this morning ... If you do, go forth to follow Him, to obey Him, to listen to Him and to live a life of remarkable creativity.