

For at least the next nine weeks Pastor Mike and I will be preaching from the Old Testament, specifically Genesis. Today we are going back to the beginning, Genesis 1. Now why are Pastor Mike and I going back to the beginning? Some people would argue that Genesis is not relevant to our understanding of God today...that it is the New Testament we need to understand because it contains the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Well, just last week we looked at Revelation 22, the END of the Bible, where Jesus says “I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Jesus does not just talk about the end, but he also says he is the beginning. The beginning matters somehow. So we are going back to the beginning, because the way in which it all begins matters. Genesis 1 affects how we understand God and it affects how we understand Jesus Christ.

Genesis gets a lot of unwanted air time in scientific specials on public television. Have you noticed this? As human begins, we spend a lot of time asking the questions how the world was created, and when the world was created. The “how” is under big debate. Was it a big bang? Was creation done in a literal seven days? Or are those days symbolic of longer periods of time? Given the fossil record, do we consider or accept that God could have used evolution? These are all interesting questions, but I do not think they are as important as we make them out to be. No matter HOW God created the world, the actual mechanics of it, it does not change the basic fact that we are all here. SomeHOW, God did it. And another popular question; WHEN was the world created? How old it is really? Do we try to calculate that using the Bible (and would suggest that we not because that is not the purpose of the Bible), or do we use carbon dating? Or rock formations? Again, how much does it change my life today to know the answer of how old the earth is? It doesn't. My life is a blip in the vast expanse of time. I am here now. And knowing WHEN the earth was created does not change that.

So what question does matter? If we take our focus off the questions of HOW and WHEN, what are we left with? Well what about the question “why?” Why are we created? Why is the world here? Isn't that a much more important question for me and for you today? Don't we need to know why we are here? Why did God create? For an answer to that question, which will be answered in our Genesis passage this morning, I actually want to start with a very well-known verse in the New Testament, yes the New Testament. Instead of the Old Testament pointing to the New Testament, which is the direction we normally go in, I am going to consider that the New Testament can point to the Old. Using probably the most well-known verse in the New Testament, John 3:16. Let's read this well-known text: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. That whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” This verse is one of the cornerstones of our theology. But I think we tend to focus on the second half of this verse more than the first. We latch on to the wonderful message that “whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” But what about the first part? “For God so loved the world.” In a book I recently read by a brilliant scholar named Iain Provan he asks an important question about this verse. He asks when did God begin to love the world? If he “so loved the World” that he would come as God incarnate to be executed for our sin, where does that love originate? To understand how God could so love the world, to understand WHY we were created, we indeed have to go back to Genesis 1. So I am going to read from Genesis 1, but I am not going to read every word of every verse. Because of the amount of scripture we are going to cover in this new sermon series on Genesis, both Pastor Mike and I will be consolidating the passages so that we can cover the large concepts covered by them. Please feel free throughout the sermon to take the pew Bibles and have them open. I will reference specific verses

later and our condensing these passages by no means diminishes some verses over others. With that let's look at most of Genesis 1 together. A consolidation of Genesis 1:1 to 2:3

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 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. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. And God saw that it was good. And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. And God saw that it was good. And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.”

Here in Genesis 1 we have an account of the creation of the world. It is not the only account, it is actually repeated but in a different format in Genesis 2. But Genesis 1 is a poetic account of creation. Remember that it is not a scientific account and not a geological account. It is a poetic setting and was probably even more lovely to read in its ancient Hebrew. However, even in an English translation, even with my consolidation of this passage, you can hear the poetry. You can hear the repetition of “God spoke”, “it was so”, and it was good.” You don't have to be a Hebrew scholar to pick up on these things.

The repetition of phrases like “and God saw that it was good” are part of the poetry, but they are also an important writing device. Any time an author repeats something they do it for what reason? To make a point. To emphasize it. They did not use underlines and CAPS and **bold print** in ancient Hebrew scrolls. If you wanted to emphasize something, you repeated it. So it is repeated seven times that what God created was good. Creation is good. And that is the first learning point from Genesis 1. Creation is good.

Now what does it mean that creation is good? That the world is good? In some ways we might agree that the world is good. Go outside and look at the beautiful mountains and vistas we enjoy right here in Utah. One might call that good. What God created is good. However, there is much in this world that we would not call good, correct? There is darkness in the world. There are bad things going on every day. And sometimes we focus on language that makes the world a dark place to be overcome. The darkness of sin does need to be overcome. But the world is not bad. Creation is essentially good and we are created to be a good part of it. Some religions and practices label the world as not good and a place to be transcended rather than experienced or enjoyed. Sometimes we are encouraged to escape the world more than enjoy its goodness. One scholar said

this: “the world is categorically not a problem to be overcome. It is not a mistake. It does not trap human beings in a place where they were never meant to be...creation does not lack something in being experienced in personal terms...its physical, sensual pleasures are not traps to ensnare the soul. On the contrary...the world is a wonderful place, created in such a way as to be exactly the right place—a good and beautiful place—for the flourishing of the creatures...who have been created by the One...”

So creation is good, creation is not the problem. What God created was not just ok or a nice experiment gone bad, it was good. And Genesis 1 makes this clear. Now how can we experience creation as good? Despite being jaded by the negatives that our culture brings to our lives, can we still experience the good? Can we see it as good? When you realize you just took a breath can you thank God that you were placed on the only planet with breathable air? When your foursome on the golf course gets rained out, can you be thankful for the water that will sustain you for the next year? Are there animals in any of your homes of which you enjoy the companionship? When you exercise your talent for cooking, sewing, math, engineering, gardening, teaching, or caring, do you realize that is part of a good creation? And when you enjoy the fellowship of a biological family or church family, do you see them as a good gift from God? What God created for you and for me is good.

Another thing we learn about creation from this passage is that God creates with order and purpose. Whether you take this passage as literal or poetic, you cannot escape the careful order. There is planning. There is prioritization. Creation moves from the big and general...sun, light, and earth...to the smaller and more detailed of sea life, birds, livestock, bugs, and finally the more complex human being created in the image of God. Each creation leads logically and beautifully to the next. And they can't go in any other order, they rely on one another. All are connected and yet unique.

There is a joke about a doctor, an engineer, and a politician debating who had the oldest profession. The doctor chimed in first. "Well," argued the doctor, "without a physician mankind could not have survived, so I am sure that mine is the oldest profession." "No," said the engineer, "before life began there was complete chaos, and it took an engineer to create some semblance of order from this chaos. So engineering is older." "But," chirped the triumphant politician, "who created the chaos?"

I thought that joke was perfect for an election year. But all jokes aside, God created with order. There was no chaos. Actually, there was nothing. God creates from nothing and creates with careful order and purpose. The complex ecosystem in which we live is no accident. If creation were not carefully ordered, we would not be here. In 2004, world renowned philosopher and atheist Anthony Flew, switched from atheism to theism, from believing there is no God to believing that there is a God. He published a book titled *There is a God* in which he explained that after careful study of DNA molecules, he could not uphold atheism. He said this: “What I think the DNA material has done is that it has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce (life), that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements to work together.” That is a once atheist admitting that creation is so complexly ordered, that there has to be a creator, someone put things in order. What is striking to me is that in 2004 Anthony Flew goes to great lengths to discover what was recorded in Genesis 1 thousands of years before. That God creates with careful order. But God's careful order goes beyond just DNA molecule design. God has a much greater plan, which we will look at in a moment.

So, creation is good, and it is done in careful order and design. Another thing Genesis 1 teaches us is that creation is sacred. Now I want to be careful here, because I don't want anyone to confuse this with divine.

Creation is not divine. Creation itself should not be worshipped. Creation is ordered by God, as I just discussed, but God is separate from creation. We can encounter God in creation, but in Genesis creation and God are separate, they are not one in the same. The reason I point this out is that there are people who will claim that creation is God. They will worship creation. And creation was not made to be worshipped. However, it is made to be sacred. Creation is sacred because it is a place that God has chosen to make himself known. We should respect and protect creation because we love the Creator and we love what God has created.

Genesis 1 establishes creation as sacred. Creation is likened to a sacred temple. Now I could write a whole separate sermon on why this is, but in a few short points, one: the seven day construction reflects the seven day temple dedication that was common in the ancient near east, two: in verse 14 when God creates lights in the sky the original Hebrew does not use the common words for sun and moon, but rather the Hebrew word for light that is used to refer to lights in the sanctuary of the temple, and three: the phrase used at the end of the creation passage is the same phrase used at the end of Moses construction of the tabernacle. In other words, the careful selection of words and the construction of phrases in Genesis 1 put creation in a place that is more than just a place. It is God's holy place. And if creation is good, and ordered, and God's holy place, then we need to treat it as sacred. Many Christians argue that caring for creation is a moral obligation. And that is a nice thought. But I consider caring for creation more than a moral obligation. We need to care for creation because it is sacred.

So this very old chapter of scripture, Genesis 1, tells us a lot of important things. It tells us that creation is good. This is a special place created for us, God's children. It also tells us that creation is carefully ordered. You and I are carefully designed. Our world is carefully ordered. And creation is sacred because of who made it. So the world is not a place to be fixed, but rather a place to be admired, enjoyed, and respected. And finally, Genesis 1 is important because it answers the question raised from John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son." When did God begin to love the world? When God created it, from the beginning. Why does God so love the world? Because God created it out of love to be good, carefully designed, and sacred. And when sin enters the world and things go wrong, God does not abandon creation. Rather, God takes steps to *save it*, because it is that important to him.

Reformed Scholar Iain Provan, who I mentioned earlier, puts it this way: "God certainly calls his human creatures toward the same goodness that he displays; in fact, commands it. However, God certainly does not coerce it – as if human beings were created to be (as in other Mesopotamian beliefs) the slaves of the gods...(and) the human failure or refusal to obey the command does not bring the world to an end, nor does it lead to divine disengagement from the world...God does not reject the world, or even stand aloof from the world; he takes the world as he now finds it, and he actively works with what he finds. God pursues the good..." You see, what Jesus does on the cross does not make sense without Genesis 1. God would not come to earth incarnate and be executed for a creation that he did not carefully make, make good, make sacred, make in God's image, and make out of love. When you take all this into consideration, the coming of Christ is the fulfillment of what is done in Genesis 1. Which is why in Revelation as we read last week, Jesus says that he is the beginning and the end.

It is important to know where we began, isn't it. It is not just history. It is part of understanding who we are and who God is. We are God's creation, and the creator is *still pursuing his creation*. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.