

God Never Gives Up: The Good Kingdom Created

Gen 1:1-5, 26-29, Rev 4:1, 6, 9-11

Good morning! Happy new year! Yesterday Alice and I were having breakfast and she said “Good morning Alexa” to our Echo speaker. Alex was surprisingly talkative. She said, “Good morning! Have a wonderful weekend, the first weekend of 2020. That means there are still 51 more weekends to go, yippee!” I never expected Alexa to say yippee! As we start the new year we are looking at the Bible with fresh eyes. How do you feel when you hear the word Bible? What words pop into your head? Confusing, intimidating, authoritative, irrelevant, holy, boring—yes—our relationship with the Bible is complicated. The Bible is challenging to us—what do we do with a book that is 1800 pages long and full of weird names, confusing stories, and was written to people who lived thousands of years ago?

Those are all good questions. It is so easy to get mixed up about Bible things. You’re not alone. A group of children were asked some questions about the Bible. – one child said that Noah’s wife was Joan of Arc. Another said that Moses was given the 10 commandments on Mt Cyanide. Did you know that King Solomon had 300 wives and 700 porcupines?! One kid said that Lot’s wife was a pillar of salt by day and a ball of fire by night! We struggle to hold this long, complicated book together in our minds. It is easy to assume it is just a collection of ancient books that are unrelated—just randomly stuck together by the early church. But that would be wrong.

The Bible tells an overarching, unified story. A *true* narrative story. Even though it was written over a thousand years by dozens of human authors, it tells a coherent story from start to end. If you remember that big story as you read various individual stories in different parts of the Bible, that will help you understand where you are and how the portion you are reading fits into the big picture of the Bible.

Today we have 3 take home points—First, the Bible is God’s story. Second, we are part of that story (so it is relevant to us). And third, Genesis 1 sets the stage for the whole rest of the story. The Bible is God’s story, we are living in it, and Genesis 1 sets the stage.

A couple of quick thoughts about the Bible as God’s story: The first and most important thing to know about the Bible is that communicates mostly through story. It tells us the history of God’s interactions with people. Not only that, it points ahead to the future end of the story. When I say story, don’t get mixed up—I am NOT saying it is a *fictional* story! It’s a TRUE story, it is THE story that everything else, including our own lives, fits into.

The second most important thing to know about the Bible is that God is the main character, God is the hero—not us. This is a story about God. As Rick Warren said on the first page of a Purpose Driven Life—it is not about you. We aren’t the center of attention, God is.

The third thing to understand is that the Bible has rules in it, including some rules that fully apply to us today, but it is not fundamentally a rule book. It tells us the history of God’s interactions with humans and shows us how to play our part in that story. The Bible tells us facts—truths—about our lives and how we can live well. It tells us how we can live our lives as a productive, constructive, loving ways.

Please take a look at the insert in your bulletins. I hope you will hold on to this, take it home, put it in your Bibles, refer to it. On one side is a short overview of the Bible narrative. The theme of the whole Bible, and the name of this series of sermons, is God Never Gives Up. God never gives up. The focus of the Bible is not an angry God out to get you, the Bible shows us a loving God who keeps trying to rescue us despite ourselves. God never gives up. You are already deeply loved by God.

The other side of the insert invites you to Join in the Drama of the Bible. This shows you the big outline of the Bible that we’ll be covering over the next 8 weeks or so, and it suggestions for helpful resources. The Bible Project videos are especially worth watching.

The Bible tells us God’s story, but this isn’t a story that is separate from us. It is not outside of us, or unrelated to us, or irrelevant to us. It is our story too. We are *living* in it! The Bible helps us to live our part of the story well. If you want to live a meaningful, purposeful life, the Bible is the pathway to that life. Pastor Eugene Peterson says that the Bible story

invites us in—it doesn't force us, but it invites us and shows us what is involved in becoming fully human. That is why the Bible is relevant to us---it tells us the story we are actually living in and shows us how to become the people we were made to be.

Bible scholar Tom Wright popularized this idea of the Bible as a story in five acts. Today we are just looking at Act 1—Creation. God creates the Good Kingdom. This act is only two chapters long in the Bible, just Genesis chapters one and two. But it sets the stage for this epic story about God and his people. We learn about the main character, God. We learn about the setting—the world, and we learn some key facts about human beings.

Let's look at just the very first verse of the Bible—in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now when people read the beginning of Genesis, they often get off into the weeds—arguing and worrying about exactly *how* God created the world—something the Bible doesn't really tell us much about. People are quick to get into arguments about various theories about how creation happened. First Pres, let's not miss the main point—God created the heavens and the earth. That is a way of saying everything. God made it all. God is not part of the universe; he created the universe! The true God is creative and he is in charge. That truth is spelled out here in the very first chapter, and it was repeated in our other reading from clear at the end in Revelation, the last book of the Bible. The Psalms echo it over and over, like in Psalm 8 that we read as our invitation to worship--God made us and everything else, so let's worship him!

Then we see this world that God created—the heavens and the earth, everything that is. One thing you notice reading Genesis 1 is a word that is repeated over and over—God created something and he saw that it was . . . GOOD! Yes, good—God created the world good. The setting for this story of the Bible, the story of our lives, is God's good creation.

At the end of the creation account, on the sixth day, God made a special kind of creature, something that made him say things were *very* good. God made human beings and then he said it was VERY good. You see, people are not an accident. We are not a random result of unthinking processes. We are the crown of God's creative work. This is not an anti-science position. Dr. Michael Denton, is a double doctor, he has both an MD and he earned a PhD in biochemistry from Kings College London. He was senior research fellow in Biochemistry

for many years and did work in the area of genetic eye diseases. He describes himself as an agnostic, but he writes that “all the evidence available in the biological sciences supports the core proposition that the cosmos is a specifically designed whole with life and mankind as its fundamental goal and purpose, a whole in which all facets of reality have their meaning and explanation in this central fact.” Isn’t that remarkable—an agnostic scientist arguing that *all* the evidence in biology points towards a purpose to create life and specifically to create people, just like we see here in Genesis 1.

The thing that really sets humans apart in the Genesis account is that it says God made us in his own image. He breathed his Spirit into us. We are special because we bear God’s image in the world. We are different from every other creature because we are the ones made in God’s image.

What does it mean to carry God’s image? First, we are able to make moral judgments. We can love or refuse to love; we care about ethics and justice. We are moral agents like God. Second, we are intelligent and creative like God. God put us here on earth and charged us with being creative. Other creatures just live and eat and mate and die, the same generation after generation. But people are different. We create new things. Cities, art, music, stories, beauty, technology, philosophy, science. Verse 28 is an especially important clue to what image of God means. It says that God blessed the humans, and he told them to be fruitful, to fill the earth and subdue it and to have dominion over the other creatures.

Did you hear that? God put the humans in charge. Not as brutal overlords, but as God’s stewards on earth. We are called to manage and renew creation, not destroy it. God put us here as his representatives, his image, reflecting his love and rule out into the world. This verse is the first commandment in the Bible. People call it the cultural mandate—the command to go and make culture, to cultivate, to nurture, to serve the rest of creation. The thrust of this command is not about abusing the earth or the other parts of creation—it is about serving and caring for it, helping it develop to its full potential.

One time a minister visited one of his parishioners. It turned out the guy was an avid gardener and was happy to give a tour. The garden was a magnificent sea of reds, greens, purples, blues, whites, yellows and pinks. The minister exclaimed “the Lord has blessed you

with a beautiful garden!” “Yes” the man admitted, “but you should have seen it before I got here and God had it all to himself!”

God is not a bad gardener, but he leaves room in creation for us to contribute. Room for us to be creative image bearers and to build on his work. God put us here to continue his work and to reflect his love and rule into the world.

Friends, this is Act 1 of this great narrative, the Bible. Here in act 1 we meet the creator God, who made everything. We see that the world he made was created good. And we see that he made us—human beings—as his special image bearers to care for and rule over his creation on his behalf. He gave us a job to do. Having done all that, God declared that it was very good.

That rosy picture isn’t what we see today though is it? Things have gone badly off track, and you’ll have to come back next week to learn why. For today, though, I have a spoiler alert for you—this picture of how God began the story gives us a clue to what the end of the story will look like. Eventually we are heading towards something like what we read here: Us--God’s image bearers—living with God and enjoying God’s blessings in God’s good creation, doing meaningful, interesting work as we steward God’s creation. That is a future to look forward to!

Let’s pray: Father God—we are humbled to remember your amazing acts of creation—how you made everything that is through your Spirit and your Word. Thank you for this incredible world and the gift of life. We are even more surprised to see the inherent worth you give to each and every person—because we all were made in your image. Lord help us to live out your call to rule and care for and protect your creation and to project your loving rule into the earth. In Jesus’ name we ask it, Amen!