

***God's Creative Work***  
***Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8***  
***May 25, 2008***

Julie came home from the first grade one day at the beginning of the school year. She asked, "Mommy, where did I come from?"

Mother was surprised by the question. She quickly thought back to her first grade experienced and did not think that biological science was part of the curriculum back then. She put that thought aside and forged ahead figuring that children are just more advanced these days. She explained how two people fall in love, decide to marry, and so on. There was some detail about reproductive anatomy and physiology, but only as much as a six-year-old might comprehend. Finally after almost a half hour of explanation, she asked Julie, "Does that answer your question, sweetheart?"

Julie responded, "Well, I guess so. Jimmy, who sits in front of me, just came from Chicago."

Questions about our origins are not limited to children, and certainly not to the location of one's birth. Humans have been asking questions about our beginnings for hundreds of years. The book of Genesis has two different creation stories which seek to address the beginning of life on earth. The second story tells about the Garden of Eden and the man and woman who were created from the dust of the earth to tend the garden and its inhabitants.

This morning we have heard the first story of creation from Genesis. Just as its content speaks of an order in the world, the narrative itself is orderly. Biblical scholars believe that this version may have been used in the worship life of the people, perhaps as a responsive reading including the leader and people, as we did this morning. It was an act of worship affirming the faith of the people in the God who is the Source of all life on earth, including human life.

As an act of worship it proclaims a truth about the Creator of life; however, it does not provide a factual account of the beginning of the world. The doctrine of creation is not concerned with how things began but rather with why things exist. Science asks objective "how" questions. Religion asks personal "why" questions about meaning and purpose, about ultimate origin and destiny. As a religious document, Genesis is not about *how* the world was created, but rather about *why* it was created.

It is helpful to know that this scripture was probably written in the sixth century before the Common Era. It was written to the Hebrew people who were in exile in Babylon. Imagine how they felt far from their homeland. Being so distant from their culture, they also likely felt distant from their God, the God they had come to know from the stories, rituals, and deep traditions of their life together. Living in a foreign culture the Hebrew people were exposed to the many gods of paganism. In this context the author of Genesis wanted to affirm the existence of the One True God, the maker of heaven and earth. He offered this affirmation of faith to assure the exiles that God still has a faithful relationship with the earth and all its inhabitants. God has not abandoned this relationship even in a setting which does not acknowledge God.

There is a Frank & Ernest cartoon in which Frank and Ernest are angels talking to God on a cloud. They are all looking down at planet Earth. Frank says to God: "He looks lonely. Why don't you split the Adam?"

Although Adam is not named until the second creation story, I think that Frank has a good clue as to why God created humans: for relationship, both with one another and with God and all of creation. Since humans are created in the image of God and knowing that we need

relationship in order to survive, we can surmise that God also has a yearning for relationship. Through Jesus we know God as compassionate, caring, and loving Being. God created life in order to have creatures upon which to shower God's care. That's the why of creation.

Religious leaders found it important to reinforce this point during the Babylonian exile. The God who created life continues to desire relationship with creatures. The fact that historical circumstances hinder that relationship does not mean that God no longer cares. God is faithful and will remain so. The first creation story affirms that truth.

In preparation for this message I intentionally consulted some Jewish resources, for the Hebrew Scriptures are rooted in that culture. One of the things I learned is that in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the great Jewish commentator Rashi made a case that the first verse of Genesis functions as a temporal clause. It is best translated, "When God began to create heaven and earth."<sup>i</sup> Traditionally we have translated the verse "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth." This translation implies that there was a moment of beginning and all things were brought into existence out of nothing (creation *ex nihilo*). The Jewish translation suggests that "the formless earth and waters were pre-existing material out of which God shaped the world. Creation is thus understood as ordering, as imposing a design on formlessness and chaos."<sup>ii</sup> "When God began to create" suggests that God's creative work is an extended process taking place over a period of time. God's creative work culminates in the seventh day, the day of rest and renewal. The Hebrew word for rested is *shabat*, hence the word Sabbath. There is also deep biblical significance to the number seven, a number of completion. Thus, God's creative work is an ongoing process until its completion.

There is more to glean from the opening verses of Genesis. The Jewish translation again is, "When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, "Let there be light."<sup>iii</sup> Creation did not begin in a vacuum or a state of emptiness. Jewish scholar Peter Ochs suggests that "the earth was *there* at the beginning, but as a condition of raw possibility, pregnancy." It was in "a state of maximal plentitude."<sup>iv</sup> God worked with the raw materials of the earth and the water like a potter works with clay to fashion life and systems for sustaining life. We might think of the earth as a palette of all possible colors; God's spirit uses that palette to paint the portrait of this world.

God's spirit gave form to the raw materials of the earth. God is envisaged as a poet, speaking a word that elicits life. From the particles of the universe the sun, stars, and moon were shaped to give light. Creatures of water were fashioned out of the abundance of the waters. Creatures of the earth were designed out of the earth's fullness. This is a poetic narrative about a Master Artist's passion and creativity. Mystic Meister Eckhart said, "What does God do all day long? God gives birth. From all eternity, God lies on a maternity bed giving birth."

It is God's nature to give life. This is the why question addressed by the Genesis creation story. Jesus affirmed this truth in his life and ministry and most profoundly in his death and resurrection. God's creative work continues even today, bringing new life out of the old.

When we understand that the first creation story in Genesis is a faith statement of a religious truth, we are better able to accept that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. The media has called our attention to creationism, a school of thought that denies Darwinian evolutionary theory by denying that natural selection can explain either the origin of life or the origin of new species.<sup>v</sup> Another

highly publicized theory is intelligent design, which holds that the observable complex design of the natural world indicates the action of an intelligence beyond natural processes.<sup>vi</sup>

An alternative but less known view is advocated by theistic evolutionists who have made peace between their faith commitments and the Darwinian model of evolution. They affirm both biblical Christianity and good science. The two coexist. Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen explains that the central idea of this theory is that “God created our world to be self-organizing. God supports nature’s self-creativity. God designed nature to be self-creative; and this self-creativity includes us human beings.”<sup>vii</sup> Essentially they understand evolution to be designed by God as his plan for calling forth life. The Bible does not tell us how God did this. Evolution explains the process by which God brought about life from the dust of the earth. Science describes the mechanism or process by which life adapted and changed, and became more complex over the last four billion years. This need not threaten our faith in God or God’s hand in creation or God’s life-giving work which we continue to see today.

Biblical Christianity and good science can coexist. Faith offers the *why* of creation; science offers the *how* of the creative process. Both are of value.

There is an old parable about scientists who were climbing the mountain of knowledge. On the topmost plateau of the mountain they were sure to find the answers to the riddle of life. They struggled up the mountainside, passing through rugged mountain passages and awesome barriers. Finally they reached the top. One of the scientists pulled himself over the top ledge. He looked across and saw a group of theologians sitting around the campfire who had been there for centuries.

At the summit all stand in awe at the intricate and marvelous universe of which we are but a particle. Our curiosity calls us to seek answers to the question, “How did this come to be?” Our faith inspires us to sing, “O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made...Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee; how great thou art, how great thou art!”

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<sup>i</sup> Adele Berlin & Marc Zvi Brettler, ed., *The Jewish Study Bible*, TANAKH Translation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 13.

<sup>ii</sup> Theodore Hiebert, Genesis Commentary, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>iii</sup> Berlin & Brettler, *ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>iv</sup> Peter Ochs, “Genesis 1-2: Creation as Evolution,” *The Living Pulpit*, April-June 2000, pp. 8-10.

<sup>v</sup> Ted Peters & Martinez Hewlett, *Can You Believe in God and Evolution? A Guide for the Perplexed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), p. 92.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 94.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

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