

September 12, 2010 – First Baptist Church, Vancouver

Text: Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

Title: The Creator Creates Creation

Introduction to a new series: The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories: Genesis 1-11

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (1:1)

Today we begin a series of sermons in the opening chapters of the Bible, in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. We begin a ten-week study in Genesis 1 – 11.

Why?

For two major reasons.

First, the rest of the Bible, Genesis 12 through Revelation 22 where most who read the Bible regularly turn – assumes we know the story (or stories) told in Genesis 1 – 11. The authors of both Old Testament and New Testament assume we know the themes and theology of what has been called “Primeval History”.

I find this is especially so for the fourth gospel, the letter to the Romans, and the book of Revelation. John and Paul assume we know the stories of Genesis 1 – 11.

You see, there are indeed two halves to the Bible. Not Old Testament and New Testament; but Genesis 1 – 11 and Genesis 12 to Revelation 22. We cannot fully appreciate what is going on in the second half unless we know what went on in the first half. That is like picking up a new novel and beginning to read in the middle of the book. Or like going to a new movie but entering 30 minutes after it has started. Kurtis Findlay says at the 30-minute mark character development is complete, now the story begins.

So, the first reason we are doing this series on the opening chapters of the Bible is to help us understand what the rest of the Bible assumes we know.

Second, our culture ... or, as I should say, our cultures ... are struggling because they do not know, or have lost touch with, the story (or stories) of Genesis 1 – 11. I know that is a bold statement! But I make it because Genesis 1 – 11 has been given to us as “the story that makes sense of our stories”. Without this story we do not really understand what is happening in our world or why it is happening. Our cultures – pre-modern, modern, or post-modern, are disoriented, adrift, vulnerable because we no longer have a larger story by which we can understand our lives. It is hard to function without being able to locate oneself and one’s experience in the context of some larger narrative or meta-narrative.

Genesis 1 – 11 addresses fundamental questions people of any era and every culture ask. Questions like: Where did we come from? Why are we here? What are we? What does it mean to be human? Why does it hurt to be human? Why can we human beings do exquisitely beautiful art, and dance, and build impressive skyscrapers, and play sports, and sing and have families ... and then use one another for our own ends, abuse children, manipulate laws, exploit the earth, and kill? Why do we kill? What is wrong with us? Why do human societies rise and flourish ... and then begin to rot at the core? Where is God in all this? What kind of God is the God in all this? Where is it all going? On it goes.

I so want the whole world (!) to know the story of Genesis 1 – 11. I submit to you that if our societies knew the story ... and took it seriously ... we would witness profound healing and redemptive transformation.

In the last century, the brilliant writer C.S. Lewis composed a series of books for children – which adults love to read! – entitled “The Chronicles of Narnia”. In the book, Prince Caspian, the children find their way into Narnia and meet the lead character of the tales, Aslam, the lion. Aslam looks at the children, and says: “You came of the lord Adam and the lady Eve. And that is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth”.

In Genesis 1 – 11 we discover both our greatness and our wretchedness. And we realize ... as never before ... why Jesus Christ had to come into our world ... and what Jesus Christ came to do.

Now, today and next Sunday, I invite you to give your attention to the beginning chapter of the story. I invite you to focus on Genesis 1:1 – 2:3. 1:1 – 2:3.

Most of you know that the chapter and verse numbers are not part of the original text; they were added only 800 years ago to facilitate referencing specific texts. The content of Genesis 2:1-3 is not a new section, or new chapter. Genesis 2:1-3 is the continuation of Genesis 1:1-31. The text should have been numbered Genesis 1:1-34. Therefore, whenever I say “Genesis 1” I mean Genesis 1:1 – 2:3.

So, we begin the series on “The story that makes sense of our stories,” at the beginning. *A very good place to start. When you read you begin with ABC. When you sing you begin with do-re-mi. Do-re-mi, do-re-mi. The first three notes just happen to be, Do-re-mi, do-re-mi. Do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti ... “Let’s see if I can make it easy.”*

[Song] *Doe, a deer, a female deer,
Ray, a drop of golden sun,
Me, a name I call myself,
Far, a long, long way to run.
Sew, a needle pulling thread,
La, a note to follow sew,
Tea, a drink with jam and bread,
That will bring us back to Do (oh-oh-oh) ... ”*

Now if our culture would know Genesis 1 as well as we know “Do-re-mi”.

The fact is, the beginning of the story that makes sense of our stories is a poem, or a song. Not a philosophical treatise – though it opens up profound philosophical insights! Not a scientific paper – though it has huge scientific implications! Genesis 1 (1:1 – 2:3) is a poem, a song. In Psalm 137, the people of Israel, then in captivity in Babylon, are asked by their contemporaries “sing us one of the songs of Zion”. I think Genesis 1 is one of those songs.

And the first three notes “just happen to be” C, C, C; “Creator creates creation”. I owe the phrase to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann “Creator, creates creation” (Genesis). Get these three notes correct and we can sing the rest of the story in tune. Without these three notes it is not possible to make sense of our existence. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”. “Creator creates creation”. Not just “some power or process somehow, did something to cause the emergence of Mother Nature.” Creator creates creation.

My heart breaks for the millions of people in our time who are trying to sing a song of life ... who have fabulous voices ... but who do not know the first three notes. My heart especially aches for the millions of children who have never heard how the story begins. The first sentence of the story joyfully declares “the universe is not an accident ... and you are not an accident.” The universe did not accidentally come into being ... and ... you did not accidentally come into being. There is a Maker, a Person. As personal as you and me. This Creator who delights to create, “who created you and everything around you”.

Notices how the song is bracketed: Genesis 1:1 – “the heavens and the earth” Genesis 2:1 – “the heavens and the earth.” The “hymn of creation” begins and ends with the phrase “the heavens and the earth”. It is what scholars call a “merism,” a way of expressing totality by contrasting points. “the heavens and the earth” means “the whole universe”. The Creator creates everything that is. The universe did not “just happen”. and neither did you ... or me. The first three notes “just happen to be” “Creator creates creation”.

Let me now simply make a number of observations about Genesis one. In the spirit of the text Genesis 1, I want to make 6 + 1 observations – 7 observations.

And I am keenly aware that I am now walking into a mine field of various opinions and perspectives! There is no way I can speak to all of them in one or even a series of sermons, so if you have questions about the text or what I say about the text, you can send them to Genesisquestions@firstbc.org and I will try my best to either answer them myself or connect you to someone who can answer them. Genesisquestions@firstbc.org 6 + 1 observations ... for today. I will add an 8th next Sunday.

First observation. We know that “Creator creates creation” because the Creator Himself told us so. That is, this fundamental affirmation of Genesis 1 is not the result of human reflection on the creation; this fundamental affirmation is the result of revelation by the Creator.

Yes, most humans throughout history have come to the conviction that this created order is the work of some sort of creator. Although they tend to get the headlines in the media, those who deny that there is something or someone who made the universe are in the minority. After all, as Psalm 19 declares: “The heavens are telling the glory of God, and their expanse is declaring the

work of His hands.” And the apostle Paul – brilliant thinker, one of the most brilliant in history – says in his letter to the Romans: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what He has made . . .” (1:20). Yet, believing the message of the heavens and earth, finally getting what the created order inherently declares is not the result of human reflection, but of divine revelation. What Jesus said to the disciple Peter, when Peter confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, can be said to anyone who believes “Creator created creation”: “flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17)

That is why the message of Genesis 1 does not “fit” any merely human visions of reality. The human author of Genesis 1 – Moses, or a disciple of Moses – did not sit down one day, and after long reflection on what any human can see around us, deduce that there is a Creator. The human author of Genesis 1 was led to that conviction by the revealing work of the Creator. What the Creator reveals connects with much of what the author and his contemporaries thought. But what the Creator reveals goes way beyond what any human being can ever deduce.

Indeed, what the Creator reveals often contradicts what human beings deduce . . . and therefore corrects what human beings deduce. For many of the contemporaries of the author of Genesis 1, creation came into being as the result of intense struggle between warring gods. For instance in the Babylonian story, known as “Enuma Elish”, the god Marduk splits the body of the goddess Tiamat and makes the heaven and the earth from the separate parts of her body. Genesis 1 contradicts and, therefore, corrects that human deduction; declaring the good news that the heavens and the earth do not emerge out of struggle between gods who hate each other, but emerge from the decision of the one God who freely chooses to make the heaven and the earth.

Genesis 1, because it is revelation and not deduction, will both connect and contradict; connect with a culture’s attempt to make sense of reality . . . and contradict in order to correct a culture’s attempt to make sense of reality.

Is this not the case with nearly every other great affirmation of the rest of the story? Especially with regard to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? A virgin conceives? “Things like that really do not happen”, our human worldviews say. The Baby lying in Mary’s arms is the Creator come to earth. “What are you smoking dude?” other worldviews will say. As Jesus dies on a Roman cross, God and humans are being reconciled, the way into the Holy presences of a Holy God is being opened. Who would have ever deduced that watching Jesus die? On the Sunday morning after He died, the tomb where Jesus had been laid was empty. Jesus was alive. Death had been defeated! “What? Such things do not happen according to our scientific view of reality”. Jesus is coming again, and bringing with Him a whole new heaven and earth. “This blows the circuits of what any reasonable person can deduce by reflecting on our present reality.” Yes, it does. Revelation does that. Comes to us as contradiction . . . to bring about correction so that we might know the truth that sets us free.

Biblical scholar Sidney Greidanus calls our attention to the narrator of Genesis 1. He writes: the text “reveals an omnipresent narrator, who was ‘present’ before any humans were created. He is also omniscient, knows the thoughts of God, ‘God saw that it was good’, and knows the deliberations of God, ‘Let us make humankind in our image’.” (44-45) Greidanus just makes the

observation without comment. But it makes me ask, “So who is this narrator?” And I think I know the answer. Who was present in the beginning ... who would be able to know the mind of God in the beginning? Jesus Christ, the Word, as the apostle John calls Him! “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1) Yes, on one level, Moses, or one of his students, narrated the revelation of Genesis 1. But on another level ... behind Moses, before Moses ... is the Word of God Himself, revealing what none of us would ever be able to deduce.

We know the “Creator creates creation” because the Creator Himself tells us so.

Second observation. Creator creates creation “out of nothing”. “In the beginning God created ... “The word the text uses is the Hebrew verb “*bara*” “In the beginning God *bara-d* ... “

In Hebrew there are two main verbs translated “create”. One is “*ashah*”. It means to take something that already exists and make out of it something else. In the Hebrew Bible both humans and God “*ashah*”. We take a tree trunk and out of it make 2 x 4s. And out of the 2 x 4s we build a house. We take iron ore out of the ground and from it make tracks for trains. We *ashah*. God too; God also *ashahs*. Scripture often refers to God as a potter.

But no human ever *bara-s*. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do we find a human being “*bara-ing*.” Only God can *bara*? Why? Because the verb emphasizes making without analogy, making what has never been before; in short, making something out of nothing. “*ex nihil*” as it is often said.

Now ... In Genesis 1 we find “*bara*” at key turning points in the unfolding revelation. In verse 1, at the very beginning, declaring that the whole of the universe is created “out of nothing” ... without analogy, no precedent for it. In verse 21, where living creatures, animals come into existence. *Bara-d* ... created out of nothing, without analogy, no precedent for it. And verse 27, where human beings come into existence. Three times, *bara*. Three times. It is the text’s way of saying “now get this” God *bara-d* humans in His own image; in the image of God He *bara-d* them; male and female He *bara-d* them.” Out of nothing, without analogy, no precedent for it.

Talk about contradicting to correct! At the time Genesis 1 was composed ... and today ... the song speaks a radically different word. When the Creator created the universe He did so “out of nothing”. There was nothing. And out of nothing God called forth the heavens and the earth. When the Creator created living creatures, the animals, He did so out of nothing. Yes, they are chemically related to what was created before them. But the Creator brought them forth as a new work of creation. And when the Creator created human beings, us, He did so out of nothing. Yes, we are chemically and biologically related to what came before us. But the Creator brought us forth as a new work of creation. Whatever else we believe about how humans came into being, Genesis 1 calls us to believe that we are *bara-d*, not *ashah-ed*, made without analogy, as an unprecedented work.

Oh how our contemporaries need to hear this word. *Bara-d*. You are *bara-d*! Only God *bara-s*. No one else could have made you. No process, however creative, could have made you. You are the unique work of the Creator who can bring life out of nothing.

Third observation. Creator creates creation by speaking. By His word. Yes, in Genesis 2 we will find God “getting down in the dust” to fashion the first human. But what Genesis 1 wants us to know first is that God creates by His word. Not by wrestling with primordial powers. Not by exerting energy against resistant forces. But simply by speaking.

“Let there be.” Seven times. Let there be light (1:3). Let there be a firmament (1:6). Let the waters be gathered (1:9) and the dry land appear (1:9). Let the earth sprout vegetation (1:11). Let there be lights in the firmament (1:14). Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures (1:20). Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind (1:24). Seven times ... “let there be.” And then an eighth time, “Let us”, “let us create humans in our image”. The Creator creates simply by speaking.

Are we surprised then, that when the Creator comes to earth as one of us, Jesus re-deems and re-creates simply by speaking? “Arise, take up your bed, and walk.” “Demons, be gone.” “Wind and waves, be still.” “Lazarus, come forth”, and a dead man walks out of the tomb!

Which gives us tremendous hope. The God who made us need only speak and things begin to happen. Which He is doing all the time. Speaking into being new creatures in Jesus Christ. One day He will say the word “Now” ... and the new heaven and the new earth will descend.

But I am getting ahead of the text before us.

Fourth observation. Creator created creation in divine time; or, on His own time-table. This is the point of the 6 + 1 structure of Genesis 1. Six days plus one. Seven.

In the Bible the number seven points to completion, or perfection. In the last book, the Revelation of Jesus Christ, John speaks of seven Spirits of God. John knows there is only one Spirit of God. “Seven Spirit of God” is John’s way of saying “the Spirit of God in all His completed-ness, in all His perfection”. The seven-day structure of Genesis 1 is a way of saying “God made the universe and all things within it in His time, on His perfect schedule”.

Genesis 1 is riddled with sevens. Not just 7 days. For example: In the first verse there are 7 words. In the second verse there are 14 words, 7 x 2. In the seventh day section there are 35 words, 7 x 5. Get this: each noun in verse one is repeated by some multiple of 7! God (Elohim) – 35 times, 7 x 5. Heaven – 21 times, 7 x 3. Earth – 21 times, 7 x 3. And “It was good” – 7 times.

Seven days. 6 + 1. A way of saying “however the Creator did it, He did it in His own time”.

Fifth observation. Creator creates creation in a divine way. This is crucial to see.

Look at Genesis 1:2 “And the earth was formless and void”. Formless and void. In Hebrew “*tohu*” and “*bohu*”. *Tohu* – formless, no structure. *Bohu* – void, empty.

The “song of creation” then sings of how the Creator brings form out of formlessness and fullness out of emptiness. And it is beautiful to watch this unfold!

[slide] Genesis 1 is laid out in two rows: days one to three, and days four to six.

Day One	Day Two	Day Three
Day Four	Day Five	Day Six

[slide] In days one to three, we have the movement from formless to form, from chaos to order.

Day One formless	Day Two →	Day Three form
Day Four	Day Five	Day Six

[slide] In days four to six, we have the movement from emptiness to fullness. If you will, in days one to three God builds the house; in days four to six God furnishes it.

Day One	Day Two	Day Three
Day Four void	Day Five →	Day Six fullness

[slide] In day one God calls forth light, the fundamental energy of life. In day two God calls forth the firmament, the sky, to separate the waters. In day three God calls forth the dry land and gathers the waters around it. And God empowers the land to produce vegetation, the support system for the life yet to emerge.

Day One light	Day Two firmament	Day Three dry land vegetation
Day Four	Day Five	Day Six

Now watch this!

[slide] In day four God “goes back”, so to speak to the work of day one and calls forth “lights” that use the light. God creates “the cosmic system”, as one scholar calls it, that makes for the orderly movement of day and night (Meredith Kline, NBC, 82).

Day One light	Day Two firmament	Day Three dry land vegetation
Day Four lights	Day Five birds fish	Day Six living creatures human beings

Note, by the way, that the song does not call the sun “the sun” nor the moon “the moon”. Just “the greater light” and “the lesser light”. Why? Because the song is speaking a word – a liberating word! to the ancient cosmologists who made the sun and the moon into gods. Understandably so! Given the energy pouring out of the sun every second! I understand the temptation to deify the sun. Yet, it is not a god ... just a magnificent light spoken into being by a magnificent Person.

In day five God “goes back”, so to speak to the work of day two. And calls forth fish to live in the waters and birds to live in the sky. God empowers the fish and the birds to re-produce and blesses them to be fruitful and to multiply. The Creator revealed in Genesis 1 loves to bless fish and birds! Think sockeye salmon!

In day six God “goes back”, so to speak, to the work of day three. And calls forth living creatures to live on the earth and humans to eat the vegetation. God also gives the living creatures the capacity to re-produce. And God blesses human beings to be fruitful and multiply. The Creator seems to delight in fruitfulness! God loves to see things multiply!

I think you can see then that Genesis 1 is not emphasizing six days of creation. I have no doubt that the Creator has the capacity to create in six days!!! But that is not what the text is emphasizing. After all, when the author of Genesis refers again to God’s creative work, he will say “in the day when God created”. Genesis 2:1 and 5:1 “In the day God created”. The text, the song, is emphasizing the two-fold movement from formless to form, from emptiness to fullness.

The text is wanting us to understand that this is God’s way in the world. However long it took ... or takes ... the Creator loves to move things from chaos to order, from the void into fullness.

This is what explains the human longing for order and the human longing for fullness. This is why the Gospel of Jesus Christ is full of the words “full” and “fullness”. The God who creates is at work bringing order out of the mess and fullness out of the emptiness.

Sixth observation. Creator creates creation good. Seven times – “and it was good”. It does not always feel that way now. And Genesis 2 – 11 will help us understand why. But it all began good. Seven times: “and it was good”. Day one: “it was good”. Day two: not “it was good”. Why not? I am not sure. Not because the sky is not good! Maybe, as Bruce Waltke says, tongue in cheek, “Even God does not like Mondays”. Day three: “it was good” ... twice, to make up for its absence on day two? Day four: “it was good”. Day five: “it was good”. Day six: “it was good”. The Creator is liking what He is calling forth! And day six: “it was very good”. *Tov me-od*. Why now “very good”? Because we were made! It was when the creature God names “man” and “woman” comes forth that God says “very good”!

Thus, the seventh observation. Creator creates a creature in His own image. Creator creates a creature who shows the rest of creation who the Creator is and what He is like.

We will pick it up on that note next Sunday.

O Living God ... [prayer]