It Was Good

Genesis 1:1-2:4a Kimby Young

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Last week I started a sermon series on what Presbyterians believe and I started with scripture. We always start with scripture. Today’s sermon is an extension of that sermon about how we understand scripture. Today is an application of how we understand scripture with a specific chapter. Genesis 1 – the creation story. Or better said the first creation story, because there is a second story in Genesis 2 and following about Adam and Eve – more of a narrative story – which we won’t get to today.

I love the way Genesis 1 unfolds, though I think it is one of the most misinterpreted misunderstood passages in all of scripture. And I love teaching this passage because it not only tells us about the world and ourselves and God, this passage teaches us about how to read and understand scripture.

For instance, if you tried to read this chapter as you might read a history book or a scientific manual, you would soon get mired down in conflicts with science and evolutionary theory and physical evidence. Some don’t like evolutionary theory because they misunderstand this very passage. Because they try to read it as a how-to manual, rather than a beautiful abstract description with magnificent depth and meaning.

Chapter one of Genesis, is not a science manual, or a book of historic record. It is not a journalistic report offering accuracy and explanation. It is not a narrative, telling the story of a particular moment in time. Rather, this chapter is poetry – and in fact, rather elegant poetry in the Hebrew language. It uses symbolism, emotion, repetition and passion in order to express creativity and meaning. It tries to evoke a response in the reader. And it quite effectively expresses the faith of the writer. This chapter of poetry expresses what the writer believes to be true about the nature of God, the nature of humanity, the nature of all creation, and the relationships of all three to each other – God, humanity and creation. Here’s a clue to the theology – the most repeated phrase is my sermon title. It was good. It was good. It was very very good. What does that say about what we believe about the world? This poetry is a call to praise God, a challenge to honor all creation, and an invitation to respond to God’s gifts of life and creativity.

So reading this chapter as poetry – I’m going to pretend we are in a classroom, and use an activity to dig into the meaning of this passage. In your bulletin there is a half-page insert with some lines and numbers. I want you to pull that out now if you will and find something to write with. If you didn’t get a paper or if you want a pencil to write with, raise your hand and an usher will help you.

Take out your piece of paper. You will notice there is a grid with numbers. Turn the paper so the numbers are right side up. Each little box represents a day of creation. There were 6 days of creation and 1 day of rest. Pop quiz – what was created on the first day of creation. It is an open book test, you may open your Bibles if you want. Speak this aloud. What was created on the first day of creation? Light. Right. Notice – God didn’t create darkness. The darkness exists because of the creation of light. Huge theological revelation on which I could preach an entirely different sermon. Darkness as the absence of God. Light as the gift of God. Day one. God creates light. And God separates light from darkness. And God calls the light good. Day one.

Day two – what is created? A dome, or firmament. What is that? – sky. And it separates the waters from the waters. Ok pause there. This verse points to a world view and an understanding of nature that is vastly different than our own. We know that the earth is round, that the atmosphere contains various gases, that the earth is not the center of the universe, but one planet among many many bodies, and we know many other important scientific facts and nuances. But the people of the Bible and the writers of that time did not share that world view. They believed the world was flat. The sky above was not so much a layer as we think of it. They hadn’t been up there so they just observed from the ground. They believed the earth was flat and the sky was like a dome – an upside down bowl that sat on the flat earth. Cause that’s what it looks like. And inside that enclosed space all life exists. So this is saying God reached into the chaos, into the nothingness, into the void and darkness, and spreads it apart. God created a safe space for life. In the ancient thought of that culture, the chaos and the void was represented by water, the flood waters that could bubble up and overwhelm life. Look back on verse two which says, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

The image is that God reached into the water and pushed apart the chaos to create a safe space for life. Within the dome is air and life. Outside the dome is water and chaos both above and below. This recognizes that sometimes that chaos and water breaks back thru and enters life – with rain from above, with flood or spring from below. But God’s intent is to hold back the chaos and to create safe space for life. And it was good. Day 2.

On Day 3 what is created? Land. Right. And vegetation. And the water is controlled – gathered into a certain area – lakes, seas, rivers, oceans - while land is in the other areas.

This poet writer who sees God as good and sees God’s creation as good, also sees order as good. God has a plan and everything is made ready in the right time. If you look at your paper now – the left side is completed. Every box is full. 3 boxes, 3 days. And remember in the Bible the number 3 is an important number. Three always points to God. And it means fullness or completeness. The fullness of God. The complete action of God. These 3 days represent three realms or areas in which life can exist or really because 3 means completeness – this means that God’s work of creating every possible place for life to exist was completed in those first three days. And as we know a day is a symbolic representation of time, not a literal one. So the left side of the page is about God creating every space that is needed for life to exist. On the right side of the page then – the next three days, God will create all living things to fill all the world.

On day 4, what does God create? The sun, moon and stars. In some translations, they are called the greater light and the lesser lights. Again this points to a different world view. We know that the sun is a ball of burning gas, as are the stars farther away, and the moon is a reflective rock – all are places or bodies in space. However, not knowing science as we do today, the ancient people thought of the sun, the moon and the stars as living creatures or living organisms – day creatures and night creatures that lived with the realms of light and darkness. First God created the place of light and darkness, then when the time was right and only after the time was right – God created the living creatures to inhabit that place.

On day 5, what does God create? Birds – sky animals, and sea creatures – of every kind. To fill the next two places that were created on day 2 – sea and sky or firmament.

On day 6, God created land animals and human beings – to fill that third space of land.

I love that humans don’t even get our own day. We humans think of ourselves as superior and better than all the rest. But really, humans are created on the same day as all other animals that inherit the land.

What does that say about the nature of humanity, our call and our relationship to the world? There’s another whole sermon for another day – about stewardship and our responsibility for care of creation.

There are so many interesting points to talk about in this passage. I’m sorry we’re not in a classroom where we could explore and discuss in depth. Since we don’t have time or the ability to talk right now, I’ve made a list of questions for you to ponder on the back of your bulletin insert. We don’t have time to talk about it right now, but we can talk about it for the rest of our lives – and think about all of God’s messages for us. God is good and God speaks to us of goodness and grace. Receive that gift today. Think about God’s provision and God’s blessing, and thank God in some concrete way for this abundant goodness. This scripture reflects that God has a plan and a purpose for every part of creation, including you. God creates everything, everyone, and every opportunity in its right time. And it is good. It is very good. Thanks be to God.

Insert

1. What does it mean that God speaks in order to create?
2. What does this passage tell you about who God is?
3. What does it tell you about the nature of humanity?
4. How does it inform the relationship between God and humanity?
5. What does it mean that we are made in God’s image?
6. How shall we live out the dominion God has given us?
7. What are the implications that God calls each and every creation good?
8. What does it mean that the place is prepared first and then the creature is created for that place? How does that speak to God’s timing and God’s providence today?
9. What are the differences between this creation story and the next in chapter 2? And why are those differences significant? What do the differences say about God, humanity and the world?
10. Why is the theology and tone of Genesis chapter one a good beginning for our scripture? How does it shape all that follows?