God Creates
Genesis 1
Sunday, September 19, 2021

A couple of weeks ago, we talked about sabbath, God's command to take one day of the week to rest from our labors. And we talked about how, in the book of Deuteronomy, the command to sabbath was given to the people of Israel as a reminder of their liberation from slavery (take one day of the week to rest as a reminder that you are not slaves anymore), while in the book of Exodus, the command to sabbath was given to the people of Israel as a reminder of *creation* (that in six days, God created everything that exists, and God rested on the seventh day, so we should take a day off to rest from our work, too). A couple of people asked me afterward *why* scripture provides two different rationales for this command and never really attempts to smooth it out or make it speak with one voice. So I thought, "That would be really great to *talk* about." But the problem is, the answer to that question is not a short, simple answer. In order to answer that question, we have to look at the first five books of the Bible and understand *when* they were written and *why* they were written.

That's what we're going to be doing over the next five weeks. We are going to do a quick survey of the first five books of the Old Testament – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (referred to by Jewish people as the *Torah* or the *Pentateuch*, which means *five scrolls*). We're going to look at *when* these books were written and *why that matters*, because *when* they were written helps us to understand *why* they were written. We're going to look at the overarching *theme* of each book, what it meant to the people of Israel at the time, and what it can mean to *us today*. And since we are *not* Jewish but Christians, we are going to look at how these books point us to Christ; how they show us something about the nature of God who was revealed to us in Jesus. And we're going to start today with Genesis.

Before we get into Genesis, though, how many of you remember the TV show *The Wonder Years*? For those who don't, it was on TV from 1988 until 1993, and it followed the story of a 12-year-old boy named Kevin as he was growing up in the late-1960s and early 70s. It was, to this day, one of the best shows that has ever been on television. It was funny. It was moving. It was nostalgic. It was meaningful. It dealt with the issues of growing up that transcend every generation, but it also dealt with things like Vietnam and Civil Rights and other aspects of this very tumultuous time.

I watched *The Wonder Years* every week that it was on from the time I was 9 until I was 14, so I felt like I grew up with Kevin. We were right around the same age (only a few years apart), so it felt like what was going on in *his* life was also going on in *mine*. It was my absolute favorite TV show. The *problem* with it was that they used so much great music from that era that they can't release DVDs or digital copies of it, they don't show it on reruns, because the licensing for all of that music is too expensive. It's not on Netflix. It's not on Amazon Prime. For the longest time, you could not watch it *anywhere*. It was like this incredible TV show just disappeared from the face of the earth.

But recently I found that you can watch the entire series on an online streaming service called Hulu. So I signed up for a one month free trial and watched as much of it as I could in a month. And I was *not prepared* for what happened. Because what I found was that watching it when I am in my 40s with children is *very different* from watching it *as* a child. It's a TV show about families and difficult family dynamics and growing up. And now I am his parents' age, and my children are Kevin's age. So I'm watching it with a completely different perspective on life. It absolutely *wrecked* me. I was in *tears* like every episode! The show has not changed. It's the

exact same story it was 30 years ago. But it has a completely different meaning for me now because of where I am in *my* life.

There are books like that, too. Books that I loved as a child or in high school, college, seminary, or when I was first starting out in ministry. I go back and read those same books now, and they hold a completely different meaning for me. These same stories speak to me in new ways based on where I am in my life.

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This is, I think, a helpful way to start looking at Genesis and the other books of the Torah. For a long time, it was generally thought that the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses somewhere around the year 1400 BC. Most biblical scholars no longer share that view. The thinking now is that these stories were passed along orally for centuries before they were put down in their final written form sometime between 700–500 BC, when the people of Israel had been invaded and conquered by Assyria and Babylon and sent off to live in exile. Their home and their temple had been destroyed, and their way of life and faith was in jeopardy of being lost. So what they did was to say, "We need to write these stories down so that we don't lose them forever."

So they were writing these stories down hundreds of years after they happened, while they were going through this traumatic and challenging experience of exile. And the way that they *told* these stories when they wrote them down was shaped by their experience of exile. They looked back on their past through the lens of the present, essentially saying, "How do these stories of the origin of our faith help us to remain faithful *now*?"

A very similar thing happened with the gospels. The stories and teachings of Jesus had been told orally for decades before some people finally said, "We need to write these down so that we don't forget them and lose them forever." And the way that they *wrote* the stories and teachings of Jesus was shaped by *who* was writing it and *when* they were writing it and *what was going on* when they were writing it. Matthew's gospel is written from a very *Jewish* perspective that emphasized Jesus as the Jewish messiah, coming first and foremost to save the people of Israel. Luke's gospel is written from a more *Gentile* perspective that emphasized Jesus as the savior of *all* people, especially those considered unclean by Judaism. John's gospel was written decades after the other three, in a time when the theology and practices of the church were more developed, and they were already facing some persecution. Each of those gospels convey the story of Jesus in a way that says, "Christ understands what you are experiencing *now*." So the experiences of the *present* shaped how they understood the stories of the *past*.

It's like going back and watching *The Wonder Years* or reading a favorite book from your childhood today. These stories that originated years ago speak to you in a new way based on where you are in your life *now*.

And so for the people of Israel, they told the stories of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy in a way that spoke to their experience of exile and helped them to remain faithful during a very difficult time. Some people were giving up their Jewish faith and adopting Assyrian or Babylonian religious and cultural practices. They were losing their identity. And so Genesis tells the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, as he lives in Egypt for years and takes on an Egyptian identity. The way they write the story essentially says, "See, what you are experiencing now has happened to our people before, and here is how they remained faithful to God back then."

The book of Genesis is primarily a story about *creation*. It is a story about *beginnings*. That's how it got its name. The first word of the book is the Hebrew word *bereshith*, which means, "In the *beginning*." When scripture was translated into Greek, that word *bereshith* became *genesis*. Obviously, we see that *beginning* in our scripture reading today; God creating the heavens and the earth. It says that, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 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 world was just a chaotic, swirling, shifting mass of *water*. There was no *order* to it. Until God separates light from dark, sky from water, water from land, day from night and imposes order on the chaos.

This is actually a theme that is prevalent all throughout scripture – the relationship between water and chaos. We see it in *creation*, in the story of Noah and the flood, throughout the Psalms which talk over and over again about surging, roaring waters that are swallowing them up, and everything is out of their control. Stories about Jesus and his disciples, when they are out on the water, and things get chaotic and out of control, and they think they are going to die. Jewish theology viewed *water* as a force of *chaos*.

But what we see here in this opening chapter of Genesis is God bringing *order* out of *chaos*. God pushes back the waters and holds them at bay to *make life possible*. And it's not just in *this* chapter. We see this all throughout the story of Genesis – God bringing order out of chaos to make life possible. When *sin* enters the story with Adam and Eve and then with their sons, God sets boundaries and says, "No, no, here are the rules." And God brings *order* into the chaos of sin. With Noah and the flood, after 40 days and nights, God causes the waters to *recede* and dry land to appear again, just like it did in the original act of creation. God calls Abraham and his

wife Sarah, who were old and without children – the family line was going to die out with them – and God calls them to a new way of life walking with him. God brings order into their chaos and uncertainty and makes life possible for them. Abraham's grandson Jacob flees from home with his brother trying to kill him, and again the family line is under threat. But God makes a way for Jacob, brings order into his chaos, and makes life possible. Jacob's son Joseph is sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. *His* life is under the threat of chaos; everything out of his control. But God imposes *order* and makes a way for *him*, providing for the people in the midst of a famine so that the family line doesn't die out. God makes life possible.

Genesis is not just a story about the act of creation in the beginning. Genesis is story after story about creation. God creating a *world*. God creating a *people*. God bringing order out of chaos over and over again. God *making life possible*. You see, the amazing thing isn't just that God *created*. It's that God *creates*. God *continually* brings order out of chaos to make life possible. This story was written at a time and in a way that reminded the people of Israel, who were living in exile and chaos, with everything out of their control, that God brings order out of chaos to make life possible for *them*, too.

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What *we* see here is that *this God* who creates order out of chaos was made known to us in Jesus Christ. John's gospel talks about how Christ was present *before* and *in* the act of creation. "He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life." And Paul says that anyone who is *in* Christ is a *new creation*; everything *old* has passed away and become *new*." Jesus Christ is the God of creation who brings order out of chaos and makes life possible, not just *then*, but *now*, *today*, *every day*.

The people of Israel in exile wrote this story of Genesis to remind them of that. And now *we* look back on this story of creation in Genesis, and it reminds *us* that God has power to bring order out of chaos and make life possible. Because *we* are in chaotic times right now. The pandemic combined with social and political division has made so much feel out of our control. It has made it feel like our way of life is under threat of being lost. That we are, in some sense, losing our identity.

And so some of us try to impose our own order on the chaos. We try to impose our own order by holding on to the way things *were*. But it only causes *more* disagreement and division. We all want things to go back to "normal," to some sense of normalcy. We want things to go back to the way they *were*, to the way we have always done them. But what if God is creating a new thing here, now? What if we are being called to trust – like Adam and Eve were, like Noah was, like Abraham and Sarah were, like Isaac and Jacob and Joseph were, like the people of Israel in exile were – in *God's* ability to bring order out of chaos and make life possible? Not to make *our own* way, but to follow *Christ* who *is* the way and the truth and the life.

Genesis invites us to trust, not just that God *created*, but that God *creates*. That God pushes back the chaotic forces of life and makes a way again and again and again. That *we* are a part of God's ongoing creation in Christ, and so whatever chaos and threat *we* are facing in life, God can make new life possible for *us*. It may not look like what we are *used to*, but as the repeated litany in the story of creation reminds us, it will be *good*, it will be *good*, it will be *good*, it will be *good*, it will be *good*, it will be *very good*.