

We begin our survey of the First Testament from now until Advent treating the themes of creation, vocation, and action. Today we begin with the beginning: the first Biblical story of creation. We often fixate on the truth-iness of this passage, reducing its message to one of opposition between the superiority of creation or evolution. Yet when you look at the text we see how it is related to ancient Mesopotamian myths about the creation of the cosmos by multiple gods, which probably predates Genesis. We also notice the way in which the language of the text has been thoughtfully worked and written. Notice the repetition, the insistence, the theological development, all in a language that is quite simple and refined. Scholars assert that this story is more a “credo (theological affirmation) than a treatise written with the ultimate objective of setting forth the truth (a scientific explanation).” (E. A. Speiser. *The Anchor Bible. Genesis*)

The story of creation (Genesis 1-11) seems to be more the broad introduction to the story of vocation in the life of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12-50) than the focus of the book of Genesis. What then does this story mean?; say about God?; about us?

In the beginning: [bereshit] in Hebrew. Some scholars assert that this word is better translated as “when God created”, or “in the beginning of...” This is because it’s a dependent clause which “cannot stand alone, because something about it implies that there is more to come. On its own, a dependent clause is left hanging, its meaning incomplete. It must be combined with an independent clause in order to form a complete sentence.” [https://www.thoughtco.com/dependent-clause-grammar-1690437] This emphasizes God’s action and presence.

formless void: The Hebrew word [tohu wa bohu] meaning unformed-and-void, or formless waste, is sometimes used as an expression even in English.

wind: the word, in both Hebrew and Greek, means primarily “wind, breeze,” secondarily “breath,” and thus ultimately “spirit.

SAID: Throughout this first creation story God’s word [DABAR] structures the action. God speaks and creation responds in essence by coming into being, entering into relationship with God. The gospel of John re-interprets or re-tells this relational conversation story in its beginning prologue in John 1, specifying Jesus of Nazareth as the Word that God speaks. It also calls to mind the words of Isaiah 55:10-11 “

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,

giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall **MY WORD** be that goes out from my mouth;

IT shall not return to me empty,
but **IT** shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent **IT**.”

good: טוֹב in Hebrew [toob] : meaning “good” and also - best (3), best things (1), bounty (2), comeliness, beauty (1), fair (1), glad (2), good (2), good thing (2), good things (3), goodness (10),

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Genesis 1:1-2:4a

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ **In the beginning** when God *created* the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a **formless void** and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a *wind* from God[b] swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God **SAID**, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ **And God saw that the light was good**; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God **SAID**, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God **SAID**, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. **And God saw that it was good**. ¹¹ Then God **SAID**, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. **And God saw that it was good**. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴ And God **SAID**, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸ to rule

HAVE DOMINION OVER: The human creatures are created with a mandate of power and responsibility. It's in their [our] freedom with and authority over creation that we seem to attest to most clearly to the goodness of God.

This notion inverts the traditional image of God, as a one who governs by fiat and remoteness in a revolutionary way. God here governs with self-giving graciousness and love.

[ideas taken from Walter Brueggemann. *Interpretation Commentary. Genesis.*]

God created humankind in his image: The section makes several theological affirmations:

It is in juxtaposition to Israel's resistance to any image of God (Exodus 20:4: "4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."; Deuteronomy 5:8 "8 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.)."

Rather in Israelite history it's the image of the freedom of God [from Slavery in Egypt, from genocide and exile in Babylon] that best represents who God is.

Sexuality is good and ordained by God, even if sexual identity I not part of the creator.

On the one hand, humankind is in solidarity before God, as a single entity. On the other hand, humankind is a community, male and female. None is the full image of God alone. Only in community of humankind is God reflected.

[ideas taken from Walter Brueggemann. *Interpretation Commentary. Genesis.*]

YOU: in verse 29 the story changes from a narration, to God directly addressing humankind with the second person pronoun, indicating a conversation, an exchange, a relationship. It is only to the human creatures that God speaks directly.

over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. **And God saw that it was good.** ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ And God **SAID**, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." ²¹ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. **And God saw that it was good.** ²² God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ And God **SAID**, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. **And God saw that it was good.**

²⁶ Then God **SAID**, "Let us make humankind[c] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them **HAVE DOMINION OVER** the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

²⁷ So **God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.**

²⁸ God blessed them, and God **SAID** to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and **fill the earth and subdue it;** and **HAVE DOMINION** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." ²⁹ God **SAID**, "See, I have given **YOU** every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; **YOU** shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ **God**

The conclusion Chapter 2:1-4a | God rested | It's not so much that God finishes creation by resting, as that creation is followed by Sabbath rest. The celebration of a day of rest then (and ongoing now when we observe the Sabbath) is the announcement of trust in this God who is confident enough to rest. A God who trusts us to continue the ongoing work of creation with the mandate of authority and care for the created order. God doesn't create for six days with coercion but in faithful invitation. God holds the world safely in divine hands, giving it to us as the created image of God. Sabbath – the 7th day – is then a day of revolutionary equality in society, rest for all regardless of wealth or place, power, or need. Equality that comes from our created identity as co-creators called together in the image of God to a relationship of mutuality, interdependence and responsibility.

[ideas taken from Walter Brueggemann. *Interpretation Commentary. Genesis.*]

generations : the word here literally means “history” – it makes the connections between the generations that stretch back from any reader of Genesis (including us today) to this creating act of God who speaks life into existence.

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

- What shimmers for you in this passage?
- Read it again. What phrase or image most speaks to you today?
- How do you see what we do together as the ongoing work of creation?
- How is our Sabbath rest important?
- What do you think is the meaning of the creation story....for you?;...for us as the Church?... for humanity?

saw everything that he had made. and indeed, **it was very good.** And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2¹Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.² And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and ~~he~~ **rested** on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it ~~God rested~~ from all the work that he had done in creation.

⁴ These are the *generations* of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Excerpts from the Enuma Elish – the Babylonian Creation Epic, which many scholars believe predates the Genesis story and was used as a springboard to critic and subvert, changing the story of creation by a multitude of gods to that of one God, the God of the Bible.

THE FIFTH TABLET

He (Marduk) made the stations for the great gods;
The stars, their images, as the stars of the Zodiac, he fixed.
He ordained the year and into sections he divided it;
For the twelve months he fixed three stars.
After he had ... the days of the year ... images,
He founded the station of Nibir [the planet Jupiter] to determine their bounds;
That none might err or go astray,
He set the station of Bel and Ea along with him.
He opened great gates on both sides,
He made strong the bolt on the left and on the right.

In the midst thereof he fixed the zenith;
The Moon-god he caused to shine forth, the night he entrusted to him.
He appointed him, a being of the night, to determine the days;
Every month without ceasing with the crown he covered him, saying:
"At the beginning of the month, when thou shinest upon the land,
Thou commandest the horns to determine six days,
And on the seventh day to divide the crown.
On the fourteenth day thou shalt stand opposite, the half....
When the Sun-god on the foundation of heaven...thee,
The ... thou shalt cause to ..., and thou shalt make his...

... unto the path of the Sun-god shalt thou cause to draw nigh,
And on the ... day thou shalt stand opposite, and the Sun-god shall...
... to traverse her way.
... thou shalt cause to draw nigh, and thou shalt judge the right.
... to destroy..."

[Nearly fifty lines are here lost.]

The gods, his fathers, beheld the net which he had made,
They beheld the bow and how its work was accomplished.
They praised the work which he had done...
Then Anu raised the ... in the assembly of the gods. He kissed the bow, saying, " It is...!"
And thus he named the names of the bow, saving,
"'Long-wood' shall be one name, and the second name shall be ...,
And its third name shall be the Bow-star, in heaven shall it...!"
Then he fixed a station for it...
Now after the fate of...
He set a throne...
...in heaven...
[The remainder of this tablet is missing.]

THE SIXTH TABLET

When Marduk heard the word of the gods,
His heart prompted him and he devised a cunning plan.
He opened his mouth and unto Ea he spake
That which he had conceived in his heart he imparted unto him:
"My blood will I take and bone will I fashion
I will make man, that man may
I will create man who shall inhabit the earth,
That the service of the gods may be established, and that their shrines may be built.
But I will alter the ways of the gods, and I will change their paths;
Together shall they be oppressed and unto evil shall they....
And Ea answered him and spake the word:
"... the ... of the gods I have changed
... and one...
... shall be destroyed and men will I...
... and the gods .
... and they..."

[The rest of the text is wanting with the exception of
the last few lines of the tablet, which read as follows.]

They rejoiced...
In Upsukinnaku they set their dwelling.
Of the heroic son, their avenger, they cried:
" We, whom he succored.... !"

They seated themselves and in the assembly they named him...,
They all cried aloud, they exalted him...