

Sermon on Gen. 1:1-2:3, p. 1

June 27, 2010

Passage

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and He 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 an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." ⁷ So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the expanse "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

⁹ And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. ¹² The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds, and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. 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 expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from 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 water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." ²³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Genesis 2 ¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. ² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³ And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. *This is the Word of the Lord.*

Except for the very young among us, we all have sat down in front of a blank page or a blank computer screen with an assignment before us. We have been asked or told by a teacher or a boss to write on a certain topic for a certain number of pages. If we want to do our work well, we will keep on target and not wander off on tangents that have little or nothing to do with our assignment. If we are writing on how we spent our summer vacation, we will restrain ourselves from writing about what we want for Christmas. An “A” paper will be thorough and concise, have good punctuation and vocabulary, and make enough points about our topic to show that we know what we’re talking about. In other words, it will be focused on the topic of the assignment, and nothing else.

Both Jewish tradition and numerous references in the New Testament declare that Moses is the author of the Book of Genesis as well as the four books of the Bible that follow it. Those like me who agree with this also contend that Moses wrote during the 40 years he spent with the Israelites in the desert, around 1400 BC. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he wrote down oral traditions and included records that particular tribes had kept about their family history. And naturally he could write easily about the events he himself took part in.

All of this has a lot of common sense in it, but I point it out because sometimes 21st century readers expect Moses to have written in a way that answers all the questions they have about astronomy and evolution, or the big bang theory and relativity. But 3400 years ago, Moses had not heard about Charles Darwin or Stephen Hawking, and would have been flabbergasted to hear that men walked on the moon.

Today we start a journey through the highlights of the Book of Genesis. To do so with true openness to what the Lord will say to us through it, we need to keep in mind what this Book seeks to tell us. It has historical aspects to it, but it is not intended to be recorded history of the sort that we read about the Civil War. It has what we could call scientific aspects to it, but those aspects are focused completely toward understanding God’s relationship to the world, and not the kind of particular evidence scientists today document. Genesis resembles a story, but it is definitely not a myth; those who attempt to reduce it to merely a myth end up calling into question the authority of God’s Word, and the truthfulness of Jesus Himself. In fact, as we’ll see in coming weeks, what we

understand to be salvation through Jesus Christ depends upon the events and theology described in the Book of Genesis.

So with this in mind, what is the purpose of the passage I just read? At its most practical level, Moses writes this creation account for the benefit of his fellow Israelites. It's not that Moses has 40 years and needs something to do to pass the time, so he decides to write. Moses knows that these people whom God has delivered out of bondage to the Egyptians will one day enter the land God has promised them. They need to be prepared. God has provided them with His law, His worship ordinances, and everything they need to survive their desert trek. When God inspires Moses to write Genesis, He provides for the Israelites a written record of their identity. The first several chapters of Genesis in particular teach the Israelites who they are in relation to their Creator. But above and beyond that, Genesis teaches them who they are not in comparison to the pagan cultures around them.

Considering this morning's Scripture, I want to examine the three most important themes for the people Moses was leading through the desert, and for us today on our own journey together. The first is the foundational revelation of who God is.

From Gen. 1, we see that our Lord is powerful. He exists and always has existed, which is difficult for us to wrap our heads around. We don't know if God has created other universes or things, but whatever has been created exists only because it pleased Him to create it. With mind-boggling power, God creates out of nothing. The Hebrew word that is used here for "create" is only used of God because only He can create this way; anything you and I create comes from manipulating ideas or things that He's already given us. And He creates simply by speaking, showing us how important language is to Him. After all, Jesus is the Word made flesh. God creates through His Word, whether that word yields animals and plants, or whether it yields saving faith in Jesus Christ.

We also see from Genesis 1 that the Lord is orderly and peaceful. When we have chaos in our lives, or especially in our hearts, He is the only one who can bring true and lasting order and peace. Part of that peace rests upon the fact of God's sovereign care for us. Our Heavenly Father is caring for every particle in every atom in the entire universe, so we can take comfort from the fact that He knows intimately what is going on in our

lives. He knows every hair on our heads. He knows when a tiny sparrow falls to the ground. He knows what we will think before we do. He knows what brings us happiness and joy better than anyone else, and He knows the depths of our heartaches.

But an all-powerful, sovereign, all-knowing God is terrifying apart from the certainty that this God is also supremely loving. Notice the delicate care God takes in creating the universe. Though this doesn't come through in English, the Hebrew conveys a sense that God is creating what we today call an ecosystem. He creates a universal community of creatures who depend upon each other, but ultimately depend upon Him. He has lovingly and carefully designed our world, even tilting the globe on its axis at a perfect 23 degrees. We are tremendously blessed to be able to see His workmanship through the eyes of faith, and understand that God has endowed everything around us with value.

This understanding of God would have been strikingly different from the idols worshipped in the ancient Near East. Near Eastern gods were the stars, the sun, and the moon. According to one culture, there was a great battle among the gods, and humanity was created when the blood of a fallen god mixed with clay. All of these gods regarded humans as an afterthought, even creating them for the purpose of using them as slaves. Those gods were distant or tyrannical; the living God of the Israelites is close, intimate, and loving. The sun, moon, and stars aren't gods in competition with Him; in fact, He created them. Our God creates all of reality, defines the part each element of nature plays within it, sets laws and boundaries, and does so with great flair. We need only think about the teeming varieties of fish, birds, bugs, flowers, and even people to appreciate how God sets the standard for creativity. His imagination and vivid use of color are astonishing. How can we do anything but praise our Lord for His magnificent creativity! ☺

So from Genesis 1, the first thing we learn is, who God is, and what He is like. The second thing builds upon the first. Because God created the universe, it and everything in it are precious and marvelous. When we read the word "good" that God uses to describe His handiwork, keep in mind that it is not a moral statement. The word instead refers to beauty, loveliness, and something fine that is made with skill. As verse 31 notes, creation as God originally made it was very good. Genesis 3 will explain to us how creation

became marred by the impact of sin. But here, the universe is pristine, as it will be again when Christ returns.

God's relationship to creation is important for us to keep in mind because He is always involved in it. When God declares His work to be good, He blesses it, and we in turn are blessed by it. He uses everything, from nature to historical circumstances to the passing of time, as means of blessing those He loves. His blessings are interwoven through the everyday things we experience. It might be a beautiful sunset or a child's smile, but many of us have experienced moments when just the right thing happened, at just the right time, to bless us, protect us, provide for us – and in each of those circumstances, we have seen the hand of God at work. People who do not have a personal, intimate relationship with the Lord call those situations “luck” or “good karma.” But we know that our Lord loves us, and is so intimately involved in our lives that absolutely nothing happens by chance.

Do we always understand why things happen? Of course not. But here we can be reminded and assured that our lives are in His hands, and those hands are supremely loving, generous, caring, wise, and strong. We know He cares deeply for the lilies of the field, whose splendor fades after just a few days. We are so much more valuable than they are, that Jesus Christ died for our sins. If you have been redeemed by faith through grace, absolutely nothing can separate you from the love of God.

This leads us to our third lesson from Genesis 1. You and I have been created in God's image and likeness. Perhaps as a child you did an imprint of your hand in fast-drying cement, as a gift for your parents. The imprint is the image of the hand; in the same way, you and I are the image of God. He has left His mark upon the world by creating us to be His representatives, and the caretakers of His creation. In the ancient near East, kings would erect statues of themselves in distant parts of their kingdom as markers and reminders of who ruled the land. Along the same line, you and I are living reminders of who rules the universe, and we as humans are to care for creation and each other with the same love that God shows toward us.

So we are created in God's image, but what does it mean to be His likeness? Like our Lord, we are spiritual beings. We are personal, and are capable of being in relationship. We are intelligent, just as the Lord is. He is creative, so are we. We

communicate, we have a sense of humor, we love, we desire justice, we have wills that can make decisions, and all of this comes from God making us like Him. In two weeks when we consider Genesis 3, we will see the impact of sin upon the divine image and likeness that we bear. But even in its sin-damaged state, the image of God in us as human beings is intact and bears witness to His goodness. And in those who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, the image is in the process of being restored by the Holy Spirit. Believers in Jesus Christ will experience in eternal life what it means to bear God's image in its full holiness and beauty.

Whatever means God used to create the universe, we can be sure that He did create it, and it is marvelous. Though sin and death have marred His pristine creation, and damaged His image in us, you know as well as I do that there is still astounding beauty and wonder in this world. We as Christians should take time to smell the roses, because it brings our Lord delight when we do. But we also praise Him for being sovereign and active in every moment of our lives, and knowing us better than we know ourselves. Our Lord is a glorious and astounding God who is clearly worthy of all our adoration and praise.

Let us pray.

In Rev. 4 there is a tremendous scene in which all living creatures and all the saints come before the Lord. They "fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ¹¹"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."