

***What You See Is What You Get***  
Genesis 1:1 – 2:4 June 11, 2017  
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I was at a party one time when a guy who found out that I am a pastor and buddied up, assuming I would agree with his contempt at the secular teaching of evolution.

As he asked me a couple of litmus test questions I realized that we were stepping into a minefield of Biblical literalism.

When I didn't agree with him, he essentially asked how I could be a pastor if I didn't believe in the Bible.

It felt really awkward.

He started ticking off points about how Genesis proves that God created the world 6,000 years ago, and he concluded his argument by saying, "The bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it."

But, you know, that's a brittle and fragile faith built upon an assumption that every word of scripture must be literally true. That's Biblical inerrancy.

One contraction, one point of error in scripture and his entire faith collapses like a house of cards.

Ever met someone like that?

It's not only a brittle and fragile faith, it closes them to the exciting discoveries going on about God's creation.

God has been at work for a long time in ways we keep learning about ... what can be more exciting than that?

One example: a couple of months ago, some anthropologists made a mind-blowing discovery that turns on its head much of what we thought about our earliest ancestors.

They uncovered a group of *homo sapien* skeletons that are 300,000 years old.

That's a big deal because they are 100,000 years older than any *homo sapien* remains found before.

We were walking around this planet way earlier than anyone had thought.

This early family they discovered had faces that looked pretty much like ours.

And not only that, but these remains were discovered in Morocco.

You know why that's a really big deal?

Because Morocco is thousands of miles away from the so-called Cradle of Civilization in east Africa where we have all been taught that humans began.

Wow! ... God has been at work through the ages in ways we'd never anticipated before.

Should that be a threat to our faith?

But if we just fold our arms insisting that scripture says it can't be because a simplistic reading of Old Testament says that it all began 6,000 years ago well, we miss out on exciting discoveries, ... and we have to start spinning all sorts of rationalizations about evil conspiracies to deny creationism.

I've heard people dismiss science by saying, "I only believe in God's truth," but, whatever is true *is* God's truth.

And I got to tell you that it's every bit as awkward to sit with equally brittle people who dismiss the Bible's creation narratives because we all know that the earth wasn't literally created in six days.

They're both Biblical literalists who aren't letting the Bible speak for itself, tell its story, in its own way.

One says science can't be right because it contradicts a literalist reading of the Bible, and other says that the Bible can't be right because it contradicts science.

But they're both trying to make the Bible be something that it never intended to be, they both miss what the Bible is, and what the Bible is teaching us about life.

The Bible was not written as a science text book, nor as a history text in the sense that Westerners of the past couple of centuries would write.

The Bible is a library of books about the nature of life and our relationship with the Divine.

And whenever we talk about the Divine we must use metaphors, poetry and liturgy because God is beyond human words.

Anyway, science isn't even sure how the universe came into being.

Current theories speculate a singularity and the energy that initiated its rapid expansion, and how particles and then matter coalesced as temperatures cooled, and how uneven clumping of matter left ripples along surface of the universe.

I love that stuff, but those are different theories from what science considered "objective reality" a century ago, and today's theories will be replaced a century from now... but Genesis doesn't say anything about them.

Genesis may not say much about science because it's speaking about what it means to be human, what it means to live in harmony with the earth and each other, and the kind of relationship we have with the Divine.

Whether people know it or not, the creation poem of Genesis 1 is so integrated into our culture and consciousness that it forms a lot of our assumptions – many of them unspoken - about life.

Is the universe a friendly place?

Is there some kind of benevolent being, force, or energy who is present for me?

Do I matter?

Genesis says yes to those essential questions.

Now the creation poem of Genesis 1 that we just read together was put on paper about five hundred some years before Christ.

It existed before then but was passed on orally.

Rabbis helped people memorize it, and it was recited by families in villages and around camp fires for hundreds of years.

But in 586 BC the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar crushed the defenses of Jerusalem, the capital of what was left of the southern kingdom of Judah.

That was about 400 years after Solomon had built the Jerusalem Temple.

The Babylonian army destroyed the Temple, and carried its gold and other valuables back to Babylon.

The Babylonian Empire had been successful in subduing the nations it captured by rounding up their business, political and religious leaders and exiling them to other locations in their vast empire where they'd eventually assimilate into the local population.

That left the captured territory with no leadership, but with a demoralized workforce to maintain the land.

That's just what happened in Judah.

Thousands were rounded up and force-marched 900-miles for resettlement in Babylon.

Living in a strange land among people with strange gods, the exiled Jews struggled to keep their identity as they longed for home.

You can hear their pain in Psalm 137:

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.*

<sup>2</sup> *There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,  
<sup>3</sup> for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

<sup>4</sup> *How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a foreign land?  
<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
may my right hand forget its skill.  
<sup>6</sup> May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not consider Jerusalem  
my highest joy.*

Living among people and their strange gods, some of the exiled priests began putting their traditions into writing both to preserve their faith, and to take a stand against the competing religious myths of the culture in which they were now immersed.

Genesis 1 is one of those documents.

And so, Priscilla led us in reading a passage written 2500 years ago to preserve an oral tradition that dates back another 1,000 years, yet that speaks to human needs as fresh as today.

Oral traditions sometimes use poetry as an aid to memory, as well as to express realities beyond mere words, and the priest who documented this creation narrative preserved it in poetic form.

Let's lift up a couple of points.

**First** of all, in Genesis 1, God simply speaks each stage of creation into being.

That tells us a lot about the Hebrew people's experience of God during the previous thousand years, and it stands in stark contrast to the religious myths surrounding the Jews in Babylon.

By the time Genesis 1 was put into writing, monotheism was pretty well entrenched in the Hebrew teachings.

It had not always been.

For many years, the Jews' thought God was a powerful tribal deity who competed with other regional gods.

But this all-powerful God creates at will: His word alone calms the primordial chaos and creates a variety of life.

Unlike the Babylonian gods, the Jews all-powerful God cannot be manipulated by rituals or amulets.

The local religions that the Hebrews had encountered often worshiped the sun god and moon god, but in the Hebrew creation poem God created the sun and the moon.

They aren't presented as gods ... and even if you persist in that belief, then "our God created your god".

Another difference is that in the Babylonia creation myth the earth is born out of struggle and violence between the gods.

In the Babylonia narrative, Marduk builds alliances with other gods and goddesses to wage war against their nemesis, Tiamat.

He conquers her after a brutal battle, then splits her corpse in two from which he forms the sky and the land.

On the other hand, in Genesis 1 God delights in what He's doing, and He blesses creation.

The Babylonian gods remain distant and fickle, whereas the Jews' God is caring and involved.

Why's this important?

Well, that's my **second point**: what you see is what you get.

If you see all life created out of violence, and if your gods don't care about you, then you are going to approach life very differently than a people who know God created them and their world out of love.

Here's a video.

See if you can count how many times the white team passes the basketball.

### [VIDEO](#)

What number of passes did you count?

Now, how many of you saw the bear?

He was there, plain as day – but if you are looking for the ball passes you missed the bear.

Had I started the video by challenging you to see when a bear appears, you would have gotten it.

We tend to see in life what we expect.

Expect an unfriendly universe overseen by distant, spiteful gods, and you'll miss the grace of God right in front of you.

Because the Hebrew people followed a God of compassion and justice, their little nation's moral values became the foundation of Western civilization and standards of justice.

Every day, you and I are confronted with similar choices.

See the world as bitter, conflicted “winner takes all” and our anxiety rises and we enter the fray.

Understand that God loves all His people, even when they appear so different, and you find peace in yourself and see ways to build bridges.

Our **third** point is about how ancient kings marked their territories.

During this era, kings would mark territory they claimed by erecting statues in their own image.

So, you’d walk through your a village and see a see a statue of a certain king, and be reminded of who was in charge, who to worship, and whose rules to follow.

The Hebrew God took this long-established practice a step further in Genesis 1:27.

*Genesis 1:27 So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

So, God lays claim to the earth by placing people created in His own image as His sovereign emblems.

Here’s a key point in the creation poem that would be completely missed if we didn’t step back from a surface reading in order to get historical context.

Created in God’s image, it is our presence that announces our Creator is in charge, our Creator is to be worshiped, and our Creator’s rules are to be followed.

And this God engages His people in the continuing unfolding of creation as He stakes claim to the entire earth (not just a local territory as did competing mythical gods).

We are God’s representatives on earth.

*Genesis 1:28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

Do you see how God leaves the world unfinished but regenerative and growing?

Trees will create more trees.

Animals will create more animals.

Humans will create more humans.

So, God and invites people like us to take part in the ongoing creation of the world.

You are a co-creator of your life and co-creator of the environment we'll leave our children and grandchildren.

Together, earth, creatures, humans and God we will create a future.

This is such a break from the ways humans had understood life from the dawn of time ... so different than the distant and bickering pantheons of gods that populated ancient cultures.

In Genesis 1, you are introduced to a God of grace, who delights in you for being you, and who blesses your life.

You are like God's royal emblem ... the image and likeness of the mighty God who celebrates creation, marking His presence with you and by how you live.

So, you have been given the opportunities of the world, and you are accompanied throughout your life by the God of grace.