



Genesis 1:1-2:4

“Creed And Creation” (1st in a series of 3 on the Great Creeds)

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“Following Christ at City Center!”

GENESIS 1:1-2:4a (RSV) "CREED AND CREATION"

7 Day Structure

Hymn Of Theological Reflection On Creation

1) 1:1-2 PREFACE TO CREATION: HEAVENS AND EARTH (CREATION IS NOT GOD).

1	In the beginning God CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH.	Clear Israelite Monotheism Presumed Ps. 89:11, No Theogony, Sexual Union
2	And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit (lit. "wind") of God was moving over the face of the waters.	Stage One: Created Raw Materials, Matter Not Eternal <i>Earth, Water, Darkness, Wind</i> = Discrete Realities Creative, Purposeful, Energies Of God Transcendent God And Stuff Brought Together

2) 1:3-13 DAYS 1-3: FOUR CREATIONS BEGINNING WITH LIGHT.

No Dualism
State Two: Creation Ordered, Shaped

a) vv.3-5 Day 1: Light Called Day, Darkness Called Night.

3	And God SAID, "Let there be light"; and there was light.	Ps. 33:6, COMMAND/EXECUTION (1)
4	And God saw that the light was <i>good</i> ; and God separated the light from the darkness.	God Evaluates, AFFIRMATION (2) Works Further With What Is There
5	God called the light "Day," and the darkness he called "Night." *And there was evening and there was morning, one day.	GOD'S NAMING (3) DAY FORMULA (4) Creation Is No Accident, God Spoke It! No Emanation

b) vv.6-8 Day 2: Firmament Called Heaven (Hard Dome Of Sky).

6	And God SAID, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."	Creation Is An Unfolding Process, Highly Interactive Job. 3:18, 26:11, COMMAND (1)
7	And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament.	Speaking/Making
8	And it was so. And God called the firmament "Heaven." *And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.	EXECUTION NAMING(3) DAY FORMULA (4)

c) vv.9-13 Day 3: Two Creations: 1) Dry Land/Seas, 2) Vegetation.

9	And God SAID, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.	COMMAND(1) EXECUTION
10	God called the dry land "Earth," and the waters that were gathered together he called "Seas." And God saw that it was <i>good</i> .	NAMING(3) AFFIRMATION(2) New: Creation From Within The Earth
11	And God SAID, "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth." And it was so.	1 Kgs. 4:33, COMMAND(1) EXECUTION
12	The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was <i>good</i> .	Interest In Ancient Natural Science AFFIRMATION(2)
13	*And there was evening and there was morning, a third day.	DAY FORMULA(4)

2') 1:14-31 Days 4-6: FOUR CREATIONS BEGINNING WITH LIGHT.

a) vv.14-19 Day 4: Lights In The Heavens (Not Named vs. Sun/Star Worship/Fates).

14	And God SAID, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth."	COMMAND(1) Calendars, Astronomy
15	And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also.	
16	And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness.	EXECUTION God's Delegation
17	And God saw that it was <i>good</i> .	AFFIRMATION(2)
18	*And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.	DAY FORMULA(4)

b) vv.20-23 Day 5: Creation Of Sea And Air Creatures Together (First Animals).

Animals & Humans Share Blessing Of Sexual Reproduction

20 And God SAID, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, COMMAND(1)
and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens."
21 So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature **Tame Ancients Myth, EXECUTION**
that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds,
and every winged bird according to its kind."
And God saw that it was *good*. AFFIRMATION(2)
22 And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply **New Item, BLESSING***
and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."
23 ***And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.** DAY FORMULA(4)

c) vv.24-31 Day 6: Two Creations: 1) Earth Creatures, 2) The Human Pair, Shared Day.

Day 6: Share Habitat Of Dry Land

24 And God SAID, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: COMMAND(1)
cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds."
25 And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds EXECUTION
and the cattle according to their kinds, **Beginning Of Classifications**
and everything that creeps upon the ground according to its kind.
And God saw that it was *good*. AFFIRMATION(2)
"The glory of God is man/woman fully alive," Irenaeus
26 Then God SAID, "Let us made man in our image, after our likeness; **Divine Council, COMMAND(1)**
and let them have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, **Image = Entire Person, Not A Part**
and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth,
and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.
27 So God created man **Not Just King but All Represent God In The Earth, EXECUTION**
in his own image, **Said Of Nothing Else In Creation: Unique Status**
in the image of God **Analogy, Spirituality, Humans Together Of High Value**
he created him; male and female he created them. **Made For Relationship, Complementary Pair**
28 And God blessed them and God said to them, **Both Men/Women Addressed, BLESSING***
"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; **Work, Power-Sharing, Co-Creators, Delegation**
and have *dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, **Care/Develop Creation**
and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." **Invitation To Study Biology**
29 And God SAID,
"Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which 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. EXECUTION
31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold,
it was *very good*. HEIGHTENED AFFIRMATION(2)
***And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.** DAY FORMULA(4)

Fulfillment Of Creation In Sabbath

1') 2:1-4a DAY 7: CONCLUSION ,PERFECTION OF CREATION: HEAVENS AND EARTH.

Adam/Eve's First Day Is Sabbath! Sanctuary Within Time!

1 Thus **THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH** were finished, and all the host of them. **God As Example, No Command**
2 And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, **Commands, Ex. 20:11, 31:37**
and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. **Sabbath Is Part Of Creation**
3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, **Stop Day! Day Different From Others, BLESSING***
because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation. **Work/Rest Rhythm**
4 These are the generations of **THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH WHEN THEY WERE CREATED.**

Science Ask How? When? Theology As Who? Why?

Neither Impersonal Fate Nor The Stars Rule Our Lives But Our Creator

In Sabbath All Is In Right Relationship With God, Self, Creation, One Another; We Are Headed To An Eternal Sabbath

CREED AND CREATION

“And God saw that it was good”

The biblical doctrine of creation in a nutshell.

GENESIS 1: 4, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

After discovering how to clone humans, two scientists challenged God, "No longer do we need you. We now can make life by ourselves."

"Okay," God replied, "let's have a man-making contest."

"Fair enough," said the scientists. "We'll do it like you did in the beginning."

As they reached down to grab a handful of dirt to begin the project, a voice was heard from on high, "No way! Get your own dirt!"¹

All that is, including all the hidden possibilities in all that exists, is from the one God, "the maker of heaven and earth, *of all that is, seen and unseen.*"² We do not make raw materials. Every scientific discovery is an uncovering of what's hidden, waiting for us to find it by the God who gives curiosity and creates a reliable world with patterns and principles. The relative autonomy of the earth, meaning it can be explored as a thing in itself, is the very foundation of scientific investigation. All truth is God's truth. We also want to be careful when scientists reach beyond their competence as become amateur philosophers and naive theologians. Tell us what you see, but don't tell us that what you measure is all there is, because then you are far outside your zone of competence. We know better.

The sheer givenness of things is a witness, though not a coercive one, to the One Divine Being who made it all.³ While God cannot be proved in the mathematical sense

¹ Edited, PreachingToday.com search under Genesis 1.

² "...and all that is, seen and unseen," is from the Nicene Creed (*Hymnal*: 880).

³ On the classic five arguments for God's existence, see Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1988), 1-48; J.P. Moreland, *The God Question* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009), "The Question of God, Part 1," 49-67; Alex McFarland, *10 Answers for Atheists* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2012), 129.

because God is not an object within creation, there is an array of arguments that together are persuasive.⁴ In short, the arguments assert that everything that begins to exist has a cause, and since our universe began to exist in what we've recently come to call *the big bang*- what the ancient Hebrews called *in the beginning*, the best explanation is a supremely personal and utterly powerful God outside the expanding envelope of space and time.⁵ Our world bears also marks of design. Someone set the dials on the cosmological constants for the emergence of creatures like us.⁶ The moral law stamped in every human mind comes from a law giver. Who can deny that we come hard-wired with an innate sense of right and wrong? Our use of reason is another approach. Why should we trust reason if it emerged only by change through evolution? But what if God gave it so we could follow divine logic written in the book of creation? Then there's the argument from desire. We hunger for food, and there is such a thing as food; we all have a deep thirst for meaning and purpose and connection, and there is such a being as God waiting to be found to slake that desire.

In her book *The Religious Potential of the Child*, Sofia Cavalletti tells of a 3-year-old girl who grew up in an home where no one spoke of God. One day she asked her father, "Where does the world come from?"

Her father- consistent with his atheism- replied with a discourse that was materialistic in nature. Matter plus time plus evolution explains it all. He then added, "However, there are those who say it all comes from a powerful being, and they call him God."

The little girl then began to run like a whirlwind around the room in a burst of joy, "I knew what you told me wasn't true; it is Him, it is Him!"⁷ Hello?

Belief and trust in God is something like that. Arguments are helpful in removing false intellectual obstacles, but faith is a gift from above, a recognition that life is not self-explanatory. Beyond all we see lies the transcendent, invisible, personal Spirit we name *God*.

⁴ The cumulative case argument. We are currently in the midst of a renaissance in the theological discipline of apologetics. Sadly, this emergence of fresh intellectual resources has largely been missed by United Methodists. One wonders why. For substantial progress reports on the discipline of defending the faith, see Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2011); Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Exposing Myths About Christianity* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2012).

⁵ This is the *kalam* cosmological argument, renewed in our day by William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008), 112ff.

⁶ On the anthropic argument, see Dinesh D'Souza, *God-Forsaken* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale, 2012), "A Fined Tune Universe: The Anthropic Principle," 157-182.

⁷ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (New York: Paulist, 1983).

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And this is just where the church’s lean and lively Creeds begin, with an affirmation that sets everything in a new light, “We believe in one God....” And when someone asks, “Well, what is this God like?” we choose two primary biblical attributes: 1) love and 2) strength, *the Father* and *the Almighty*. And if they ask, “What has this God with these attributes done?” we answer, “Made it all from nothing, dirt and sky, humans and critters, an earth for us to dwell on as stewards and explorers and an invisible heaven as a place for God to indwell with the ranks of angels and the blessed dead.⁸ Life and all that exists is a gift from a good, if mysterious and invisible Creator, to which the world and conscience give witness. The knowledge of God may be actively suppressed for moral and political reasons, for pleasure and power, but it cannot be denied.⁹ It will find a way to erupt again, and to bring delight and hope- and sometimes dread and anxiety- to those who find it. There is a God of holy love, and you are always being observed!¹⁰ Always.

Several years ago a scientist wrote an article "Seven Reasons Why I Believe in God." "Consider the rotation of the earth," he began. "Our globe spins on its axis at a thousand miles an hour. If it were a hundred miles an hour, days and nights would be ten times as long. Vegetation would freeze in the long night and burn in the long day."

"Or consider the sun. Twelve thousand degrees surface temperature, and we're just far enough away to be blessed by the heat. If the sun gave off half its radiation, we'd freeze. If it gave off one half more, we'd be crispy critters."

"Or the slant of the earth. If it were different than twenty-three degrees, the vapors from the oceans would ice over the continents... no life."

"If the moon were fifty thousand miles away rather than its present distance, twice each day giant tides would inundate every bit of land mass on this earth."

"Think of the crust of the earth," as a sixth example. "Just a little thicker and there's no life because there's no oxygen." And for the seventh the thinness of the atmosphere. "If our atmosphere was just a little thinner, millions of meteors now burning themselves out would pummel this earth into oblivion. These are reasons," he said, "why I believe in God."¹¹

⁸ On the two levels of creation as interlocking and overlapping, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, Ca: HarperOne, 2008).

⁹ On the moral and psychological origins of atheism, see James S. Spiegel, *The Making of an Atheist: How Immorality Leads To Unbelief* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody, 2010); Paul Vitz, "The Psychology of Atheism," www.leaderu.com/truth/1truth12.html. See the Vitz videos at www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgWajMM2HzU.

¹⁰ Recall Christopher Hitchens often- and angry- image of God as a *peeping Tom*.

¹¹ PreachingToday.com search under Genesis 1. See Romans 1:18-32.

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Some label this fine-tuning of earth for human habitation *the anthropic principle*, meaning if any one of the constants were off by a bit, we wouldn't be here. It appears our world was intelligently designed for the emergence of beings like us.¹² Someone built a house and now invites us to make it a home, and with that insight the first chapter of the Bible agrees and invokes the name *God*. It is not till the second half of day six, when all else is prepared, that we first cross the stage as male and female. Of all the creatures and critters, human beings alone in complementary genders are made in the image and likeness of our Maker to act as God's ambassadors to the rest of creation. God over us, and humans over the rest. It is the fundamental biblical and Christian world view, and what an awesome and sobering vision. We do not own the world; whatever legal deeds we hold indicate occupancy, not ownership. This world has been given to us to develop, guard, preserve and enjoy. It is the shared human vocation.¹³ We build cultures.

The building of marriages and the development of families and cultures, the call to polar- even lunar- explorations, the disciplines of biology and engineering are all implicitly here in the developmental task of creation. The world is good, but not yet developed, good but not yet perfected, and that is the human task, that we as delegated co-creators carry out our job of bringing to light what God has hidden. And for this reason, and we are admittedly late in getting about our task, the church ought to be *green* in the best and most thoughtful traditions of environmental stewardship, but we can never be what some call *deep green*, which is an ideology that says the world would finally be better off without human beings and in the meantime the fewer of us the better.¹⁴ It's OK to hug trees, but not if you are not

¹² It was this argument that moved the famous British atheist Anthony Flew (son of a British Methodist minister) shortly before his death from atheism to deism. For the transcript of an interview with Flew, see www.biola.edu/antonyflew/flew-interview.pdf.

¹³ A.J. Conyer, *The Meaning of Vocation*, " www.baylor.edu/christianethics/index.php?id=15345.

¹⁴ Christians have a special contribution to make to the ongoing ecological debate. Our *United Methodist Discipline 2008* contains this paragraph:

“All creation is the Lord’s and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God’s creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. Therefore, we repent of our devastation of the physical and non-human world. Further, we recognize the responsibility of the Church towards a life-style and systemic changes in society that will promote a more ecologically just world and a better quality of life for all creation” (p. 98).

first hugging people. Okay to fight for sea turtle eggs, but what about human beings in the womb who need protection from those who violate their nests? People who seem to love the rest of God’s world more than the unique beings who bear the divine image frankly give me pause. I’m glad you feed your cockapoo the finest cuts of beef, but will you help us feed the homeless with a little hamburger? Have you read the creation story? And if it does not shape your world view, then what alternative story does, because I have not found one has life-giving and comprehensive as this one.¹⁵ The Catholic theologian George Weigel said: “We are not congealed stardust, an accidental byproduct of cosmic chemistry. We are not just *something*, we are *someone*.”¹⁶ Achievements we in some sense earn, but dignity is inherent; it’s given, and the way I often paraphrase it for broken or misguided people is, “Listen to me. You are not a throw-away person. There is a God who loves and will work with you for restoration, no matter how smeared and defaced the divine image has become.”

We have a doctrine of creation that says God made it all and continues to uphold it all, but what God made is not an extension or emanation of God. God is distinct from creation, the key word for which is *holy, h-o-l-y*, meaning God is transcendent and different, distinct and morally pure. Clarity here will save us much mischief in other places. Against cosmologies that say that matter is eternal, we say, “No. Creation came into being, and before that there was only God.” There is no eternal dualism; whatever exists is contingent.

Against those who teach that the world is God’s body, we say, “No. The good world is not divine. What God made is not god. We are forever creatures.”

And when, as was perhaps more common in the ancient world, thinkers claim that matter is evil and that only spirit is good, perhaps even that some lesser God made the world as a cruel trick and then trapped our spirits in the dark matter of bodies, we say, “No, all that is- seen and unseen- is the good work of the Creator who intended it all, and it is not only good but very good.¹⁷ It is now fallen, now caught up the great rebellion, now alienated from its source, now spoiled, now wrapped in violence and death, but underneath remains a shining goodness and innocence that shall be fully restored.” The doctrine of creation is the starting point for all right thinking about God, and if we veer off course here, our thinking only gets more and more distorted. Phillip Johnson has written:

¹⁵ Robert E. Webber, *Who Gets To Narrate The World* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2008).

¹⁶ Jon Meacham, “From Jesus to Christ,” *Newsweek* (3-28-05), 48.

¹⁷ Ben Quash, Michael Ward, *Heresies and How to Avoid Them* (Peabody, Mass.: Henrickson, 2007), “Gnosticism,” 102-112.

"If there is no Creator who has a purpose for your life, then there is no such thing as sin. Sin would mean that you are in a wrong relationship to your Creator. Well, you can't be in the wrong relationship with particles. They don't care. So you don't need a Savior to save you from the consequences of your wrong relationship with the particles. When you give away creation, you have given away everything."¹⁸

And oh, by the way, the reason Scripture and the Creeds speak most often of God as *Father* is not because God is male. Our Methodist doctrine is that “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, *without body or parts...*”¹⁹ There are also several places in Scripture where God is likened to the best characteristics of a mother. God is beyond distinctions of gender, yet includes all that is best of both. The reason for the dominance of *Father* language is to preserve God’s transcendence over creation. It is possible to see a child as an extension of it’s mother, as part of her body, in a way that is not possible for a father, and that difference- that the world is not a part of God- is *the critical distinction* that must be maintained for the biblical revelation to make sense. Genesis 1, verse 1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth....” God is not the creation, and the creation is not divine. God crafted something magnificent, gave it a measure of freedom, and so freely limited divine action. It is capable of bearing witness to God’s glory, and it is the stuff through which God addresses us, but it is not part of God, not divine, and so neither are we. Christian spirituality is not about recovering your inner deity and of coming to the enlightenment that you after all a little god who has forgotten your true identity. Biblical spirituality is about a right understanding of yourself as a blessed creature, forever vulnerable and in need of God and the web of life in which you are embedded.

The church has a story to tell about the world in which we live. It’s a majestic account which begins with nothing except God’s wind-filled Spirit moving across the primal dark waters of creation. It ends with a Sabbath pause built into time, and in between knits together all the particularities of creation with the speaking of the One behind it all.

Retelling The Story

Before it was written down, the first creation story was molded by retelling into a form that fixed it in the minds of the Hebrews who listened to the poem of how things came to be by the one who rescued them from Egypt. The *bones of the story* are not hard to uncover:

¹⁸ Preaching Today. com search under Genesis 1.

¹⁹ *The Book of Discipline 2008*, “Article I- Of Faith in the Holy Trinity,” 59.

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A seven day week: six for creation and one to stop and enjoy;²⁰
Eight separate acts of creation, each building on the other;
Light on days 1 and 3;
Air and sea on day 2, their creatures on day 5;
Dry land on day 3, and their beasts on day 6;
The repeated phrase, "And it was so," and "God saw that it was good";
An opening line of divine power that echoes throughout, "And God said";
and finally a rhythm and a chorus, "And there was evening and there was morning...."

This is a symphony whose overarching theme is that creation is an interdependent whole, dependent on the grace of God. It is an ancient story and a sophisticated confession of faith rolled into one. It gives us a set of lenses through which to look at the world in which we are set and in which we are invited to feel the awe and wonder which leads to worship if the name of God is spoken. Elizabeth Barrett Browning paraphrased it in a poem:

"Earth's crammed with heaven;
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."²¹

Most of us are moles, you know, burrowing in our little worlds, scarcely able to see beyond our dirty noses. "Open your eyes," says the story-teller of Genesis, "see what God hath wrought; open your ears to the song of creation; open your heart to feelings that erupt at the riot and wonder of life; open your mouth to praise the Creator. And to make sure we do it at least once a week, God marked out a day to keep us humane in our management of the rest. Creation is not complete until Sabbath is installed as the climax of it all. Important as we are as God's vice-regents, we are not the purpose of it all. The purpose is Sabbath, a day in seven when all God has made lives in harmony, worship, and delight. The end of creation is Sabbath contemplation: to worship, to savor, to sink into the sheer gift of it all with thanksgiving, to imitate God. It may surprise you, and it convicts me every time I read it, but our church has a clear official teaching on the Sabbath. As United Methodists,

"We believe the Lord's Day is divinely ordained for private and public worship, for rest from unnecessary work, and should be devoted to spiritual improvement, Christian fellowship and service. It is commemorative of our

²⁰ For a fresh recovery of sabbath thinking and practice, see Dr. Matthew Sleeth, *24/6: a prescription for a happier, healthier life* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale: 2012).

²¹ Albert Wells, ed., *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 51.

Lord's resurrection and is an emblem of our eternal rest. It is essential to the permanence and growth of the Christian Church, and important to the welfare of the civil community.”²²

To feel creation’s power, go to the zoo with Bible in hand to praise God for armadillo and leopard, for elephant and eagle, for cockatoo and crocodile. Go to the produce counter and count the fresh veggies. "Can I help you?" Walter asks. "No, I'm doing a Bible study on the second half of Day 3 when God made the plants and wanted to count the number of veggies you have "according to their kinds."

Sit under a starry sky and wonder how many light years away a star is; pick a rock up off the ground and realize that you hold in your hand what once was molten stuff deep in the bowels of the earth. At least for a few minutes stop being a mole and become a worshipping human being standing in the midst of a world which is gift and grace and gargantuan and God-shaped from the sub-atomic level on up. And when you bow your head over a meal, don't repeat some thin blessing mumbled thoughtlessly. Sing the Doxology; sing "This Is My Father's World." Thank God for the pig or cow or chicken who gave their life, for the farmer who planted the potato bud and the tomato seed, for the Spanish migrant without medical insurance who picked it and breathed pesticides, all that you might eat and be filled and live another day as part of this vast web of life in which we live and move and have our being and finally answer to the God who gave us life and who calls us to follow Jesus together.

Paying Attention To Details

The Bible doesn't waste much energy arguing for God’s existence. It assumes on the basis of general revelation through creation and religious experience that behind it all is One who freely out of love made it all. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," is how we start. Not a scientific formula like $E=mc^2$ (left later to Einstein's creation-intoxicated brain) but words that point beyond the visible to the invisible, personal One we call God. Out of nothing it came, *ex nihilo* in Latin. Why is there something and not nothing? is the first question. “Because God made it,” is our answer. Matter is not eternal alongside God. It wasn’t, and then it was. Stuff, matter, formless and void, building blocks of creation, cosmic soup percolating, and over it all the wind of God sweeping to and fro with pregnant possibilities for beauty and structure and life and Moses and Jesus and you and me!

Already in the Bible’s first story we Christians find differentiation within the godhead: God created; God's Spirit hovered; God’s potent Word went forth reflecting the intent to give

²² *The Book of Discipline 2008*, 70. Also Jack Marcum, “Changing Sunday Practices,” www.baylor.edu/christianethics/Sabbathstudyguide5.pdf2002.

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life and shape matter. Always transcendent, God is other than the creation. Always immanent, God's Spirit and Word are near creation drawing it into order. Not until the arrival in history of the third person of the design team, Jesus Christ, will we have the evidence that forced the church to confess its most basic teaching that the One God of Israel is within himself the communion of the three persons of the Trinity and that creation is their common work. The Father wills, the Son enacts; the Spirit perfects.

Rightly understood, there is no contradiction between the story-teller of Genesis and what science uncovers. They come at the same reality with different questions.²³ Science asks How? and When? questions. What was the physical process? And in what sequence did it occur? Those are not the Bible's questions, and to try to force scientific answers from a theological text is bad theology and bad science.²⁴ The Bible's questions are not How? and When? but Who? and Why? The answer to Who? is the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as testified to in Scripture and defined in the Creeds. The Why? question is the whole story of Scripture. God chose to create because love desired a stage on which to play out the drama of salvation with a cast capable of free interaction.²⁵

In order to do good science, the question of God must be temporarily suspended. If the direct cause of every effect is God, there's nothing to understand, which is one reason the Islamic world has lagged so far behind in scientific advancement. If the answer to every question is *Allah* as the direct agent, why bother to think through secondary causes? But if the creation has relative autonomy and a web of causation, then it can be understood from within as a thing in itself. I quote Thomas Oden, a classical Christian theologian and friend:

"Everything is created out of nothing, but once something is created out of nothing, then something else can in due time be created out of the prevailing and developing conditions. God continues to create something out of all kinds of somethings. One can posit a gradual evolutionary process that is not a denial of creation."²⁶

²³ This is the so-called NOMA model of non-overlapping magisteria. Science and theology ask different questions, and to privilege the one over the other reveals ones commitments, as when science is seen as the only arbiter of truth.

²⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 97.

²⁵ For a defense of free-will theism (Arminianism), see Roger Olson, "The Classical Free Will Theistic Model of God," in Paul Helm, et. al., *Perspectives On The Doctrine Of God: 4 Views* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2008), 148-172.

²⁶ *The Living God* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1987), 265.

But if that methodological suspension of God becomes permanent and even hostile ignorance to God, then science becomes the ideology of *scientism* and begins to give answers to religious and philosophical questions that are beyond its method. God created something over against the divine life. Within the parenthesis of time it may be studied on its own, but it is not comprehended apart from a recognition of the One who stands behind it all and upholds it all. In his book *God and the Astronomers*, Dr. Robert Jastrow has written:

"A sound explanation may exist for the explosive birth of our Universe, but if it does, science cannot find out what that explanation is. The scientist's pursuit of the past ends in the moment of creation. This is an exceedingly strange development, unexpected by all but the theologians. They have always accepted the word of the Bible, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' To which Saint Augustine added, 'Who can understand this mystery or explain it to others?' The development is unexpected because science has had such extraordinary success in tracing the chain of cause and effect backward in time.... Now we would like to pursue that inquiry farther back in time, but the barrier to further progress seems insurmountable. It is not a matter of another year, another decade of work, another measurement, or another theory; at this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."²⁷

There would be no science without the regularity and patterning God built into the things that are made. One way to love the world God made is by applying the mind to its understanding. Where we must be wary is when science over-reaches its method and begins to make philosophical and theological and ethical assertions that go beyond its competence. Science can chart human conception and fetal development, but science cannot tell you whether human life deserves protection or not. Do not be so over-awed by the results of science and its spinoff technologies that you forget to notice when the expert scientist becomes a lay theologian or an arm-chair philosopher or an amateur ethicist.

Challenges To Creation

The account of Genesis 1 is not the only creation story we have from the ancient near east.

²⁷ Michael Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 84-85.

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Most cultures have tales about how things came to be, and some of them have numerous points of contact with the biblical account. The Babylonian *Enuma Elish* is one such story. Light emanates from the gods, then firmament, dry land, sun and stars, and finally human beings. Then the gods rest and celebrate. The general flow of the stories is similar. But there are critical differences as well, and that is where the theology lies.

The Babylonian account speaks of many gods, of male deities and their female partners, Genesis of only one God in a majestic monotheism that distinguishes Judeo-Christian theism from all polytheisms which import sexuality into the being of God, thus recreating God in our image. We believe in one God, a Spirit without body, without gender and yet including all that we mean by the best virtues of male and female. Sexuality is a good gift to be welcomed but not worshiped as is current in our hyper-sexualized culture.

In the Babylonian story the divine spirit and cosmic matter are both eternal, existing side by side. Not so in Genesis where only God is eternal. We believe only God is self-existent, not matter. In Near Eastern mythologies, sun, moon, and stars are powerful deities; in Genesis they are merely lights made by God. We do not worship the heavenly bodies or believe our lives are determined by the fates of astrological charts. Creation does not emanate or overflow from the divine life in varying degrees. Creation does not participate in divinity, though it surely reflects it and point to it. It was not hard for God to create. There is no battle with a sea monster as in the Babylonian account. The God who is without rival simply speaks, and it is so.²⁸ “Light be!” and light was. Thus the Genesis account is actually one side of an on-going theological debate about the nature of God and of God's relation to the things that are. Genesis is a continuing protection of the church against false understandings of creation which are as prevalent today as in the ancient world.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to our doctrine of creation in our day is from a renewed and redecorated pantheism, which at its most basic level asserts that the created order is divine, that *all* (Gk. *pan*) is *god* (Gk. *theos*), thus *pantheism*, that the world is- in some sense- God's body. Much New Age thought (by way of Hinduism) is permeated with this view of creation. If the created order is divine, then as a part of it, so are you. Discovering your own *godness* is the way it is popularized. But the Bible draws a clear distinction between God and what God made. Nothing in this creation is to be confused with God, especially not any of us.²⁹ That we live now and that we may live again after death is not by anything resident

²⁸ David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1990), 15-16.

²⁹ On the *two-ness* of the biblical worldview, see Peter Jones, *One or Two* (Escondido, Ca: Main Entry, 2010).

within us but sheerly God's gift. We are contingent creatures given special dignity within the orders of creation, stamped with God's image and embedded in the created order. We can know and be known by God, but we exist on this side of the line. We worship not ourselves or the supposedly divine within ourselves; we worship the sovereign, holy and transcendent One who is the Creator of all this is, visible and invisible, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and giver of the Holy Spirit.

Remember that when we distort God through false doctrine, we distort not God but ourselves and our world, which is precisely why meditating on the creation story is a path to truth and life. In a series of precise sentences, Thomas Oden sums up the classical Christian doctrine of creation:

"God freely creates everything. God is the cause of all things. The Maker transcends all that is made. Creation is a wise and good act. All things radically depend on God. God is good in creation, and creation, well-designed and beautiful, is to be praised.... Creation is *ex nihilo* (out of nothing); creation is good; the three persons of the Trinity act as one through creation."³⁰

This is the vision of life is built on the creation story and the church's creeds. This is the right and good vision of God, of creation, and of our realistic and privileged place within it. God is not through with us or our amazing, wonderful, broken world. This is the doorway into a robust, sustainable Christian faith.

Conclusion

To know the God who made you and offers forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ, this is what makes us fully human because it restores our relationship with God. Do you know this great Creator God and Savior? Have you found your place in his service and among his people? Do you delight in the good creation? Do you look forward to the promised new heavens and new earth? The church, I believe, got it right, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible."

The little girl was right, "I knew what you told me wasn't true; it is Him, it is Him!"

Hello?

Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
November 11, 2012

³⁰ See footnote 25 above.

A Prayer Of Confession And Pardon Based On Genesis 1:1-2:4

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray:

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
you are engineer and artist without rival.
There is nothing in all the world that does not bear your mark.
From the intricacies of the atom to the farthest galaxies, all is yours.
But we who live outside Eden have never seen its full beauty.
Ours is a good world mixed with chaos and rebellion, sin and evil.
Cells go haywire in cancer, and death snuffs out every life.
Our appetites become addictions, and we forget our promises.
Nations go to war over resources, and we stain the air and soil.
We who bear your image dream of a better world and cannot get there.
For times when we see clearly what a mess we have made, we thank you.
We welcome your call to be wise and faithful stewards,
not to be greedy and live in fear,
but to trust that in Jesus Christ there is an abundance of all we need:
mercy aplenty, grace abundant, and forgiveness in full measure.
May your Holy Spirit so illumine the reading of Holy Scripture,
that we will see how astounding is your continuing work in creation,
and we as your caretakers and faithful friends in the midst of it all.
Amen. (All pray in silence. Pardon is announced.)**

Almighty God have mercy on you,
forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ,
strengthen you in all goodness,
and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life.
Amen (*Hymnal*, 890)
