

“When Time Began”

Genesis 1:1-5, 1:31-2:4

Questions about the beginning of the universe, of the earth and its people intrigue at least some of us. God’s people sometimes turn to passages like Genesis 1 & 2 for answers to those questions. Yet wise people also ask whether Genesis is even interested in those increasingly divisive issues. To honestly answer questions about creation’s beginnings, God’s children might ask why God inspired someone to write the great Genesis story in the first place. 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3:16 insists, *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

That suggests God inspired someone to write Genesis in order to, among other things, teach us about our gracious God who gave life to everyone and everything. After all, once we know about God, we’re better equipped to respond to God’s grace with the service of our lives for God’s glory.

Confusion about God was rampant in the ancient world in which Genesis was written. Israel also proved to be vulnerable to such confusion. Citizens of the 21st century are also naturally susceptible to misunderstandings about God. In Old Testament times not just the Israelites but everyone believed gods existed. Those gods had all sorts of different active roles, including in creation. So, for example, the Babylonian creation account starts with a rowdy bunch of gods that rebel against the boss god, Marduk. He dictates the creation of savage humanity that will serve as the gods’ slaves. Marduk, however, creates those savages out of the blood of one of the rebellious gods’ that he has murdered.

How, then, could God teach Hebrews that spent hundreds of years enslaved in a spiritually confused Egypt about God’s real nature? How could God prepare Israel for life in spiritually chaotic neighborhoods like the land of promise and in Babylon into which God later exiled her?

How does the Church prepare its children for life in a world that samples from a perhaps even bigger buffet of gods? How does the Church prepare its members to live and work in a world that has so many different ideas about

God? Don't we try to teach our children about the God whom we profess reveals himself to us in both the Scriptures and in creation? And as we mature in our faith we also seek to learn more and more about the God who both creates and saves us.

Genesis 1:1-5 is one such teaching and learning tool. It's in part God's response to the plethora of gods in which people have nearly always believed. In fact, all of Genesis is a kind of impassioned argument against all the false gods we naturally and so eagerly worship. The book of Genesis insists right from its opening words that there is, for example, only one, not many gods. Light and darkness, as well as the sun, moon and stars are not, as Israel's neighbors assumed, creators of anything, but creatures. The planets are part of God's creation and so do not, as some folks believe, control our destiny.

So while Genesis 1:1-5 insists God is intimately involved with what God creates, it also reminds its readers that creation isn't itself divine. As a result, things like light and darkness can't destroy us because they're creatures, not gods. Our Scripture basically announces that the God who enters into relationship with his people is also the Creator of everything that is created. In light of the New Testament we profess that the God who saves us in Jesus Christ is the One who *"created the heavens and the earth."*

Genesis divides its description of that creative work into six "days." Each, including the one that this Sunday's lesson focuses on, follows the same pattern. Every "day" begins with an announcement: *"And God said ..."* So our text reminds us that while our world's origins may look random, its design isn't accidental. Creation is what it is because God speaks. Our passage insists that on each day, including the first "day" "there was." When God speaks, things happen exactly as God commands. As Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke notes, God's word is finally irresistible and creative.

So while many religions believed that creation emerged from a battle among the gods, Genesis insists that God fights no one to create the heavens and the earth. God simply speaks, and creation somehow happens.

When God speaks on the first day, light separates from darkness (4). Boundaries are, after all, as Waltke points out, important in both creation and society. When everything does what God created it to do, there is order. When, however, creation fails to fulfill the purpose for which God made it, there is chaos.

So it's not surprising that our text then notes that once God has created, God also assesses God's handiwork. Genesis 1:1-5's narrator announces that "God saw that [the light] was good" (4). When God evaluates God's creation this way, God is assessing its fulfillment of the purpose for which God created it. On the first day, God deduces that light is doing what God created it to do.

So what does God want to teach God's beloved people through this morning's text? Various Christian traditions offer various answers to that seminal question. Those who proclaim Genesis 1:1-5 want to be sensitive to their hearers. I too want to be sensitive to this Sermon Commentary's readers' perspectives.

Yet it is fair to say that the kind of scientific writing with which some of us are familiar is only a few centuries old.

What's more Genesis' first Israelite hearers simply didn't know as much about the "hard sciences" as we do. So had the Lord spoken to them in modern scientific terms, no one would have understood what God was talking about. In fact, throughout the Bible, God speaks in simplified ways God's people can, with the Holy Spirit's help, understand.

What's more, while Genesis certainly does tell about God's creative work, there are no human eyewitnesses to God's first creative acts. So there's no one to record the kind of history we find in, for example, textbooks. As a result, at least some Christians recognize that Genesis is less of a 21st century kind of textbook than inspired history that's written with a purpose.

So Genesis does teach extremely important things. To a culture that increasingly suspects that matter is eternal, it insists that God created matter at measurable time's beginning. To a world that can't agree on what God's like,

to say nothing of whether God even exists, our text insists that God exist and is, among other things, a loving creator.

In order to know that God well, God's adopted sons and daughters study the two "books" that are creation and the Scriptures. Yet we don't study things like Genesis and genomes, Song of Songs and cell biology just to learn more facts.

We see things like classes in science and history books as opportunities to praise God as we learn more about what God's does. Peeks into telescopes or solving physics problems prompt us to praise God as they help us to understand what God makes. Even our time with people brings praise to our lips because those neighbors somehow resemble the God who created us.

Revelation 21's account of the new creation's light only intensifies that praise. It reports, after all, that while there will be no night or even darkness in the new earth and heaven, there won't be a sun or moon either. There will be, in fact, no created light. In the new creation there will only be the perfect Light cast by the everlasting God's glory and the Lamb.

### Illustration Idea

Where there is darkness, there is fear. Where there is light, however, there is life. There is also safety and confidence. In a *New York Times* article, "The Lights Are On in Detroit," Michael Kimmelman describes how in December, 2016 Detroit officials turned on the last of its 65,000 new streetlights. Those lights are spread all across the city. Before that, businesses like Kuzzo's Chicken and Waffles had to shut down by dinnertime because people didn't want to go out to eat after the sun went down. They were afraid of what people might do to them in the dark. Foot traffic, says its owner Mr. Spencer, "almost fell to zero after dark. Since the lights came on, it's up 15 percent across this neighborhood." Mr. Kimmelman also notes that the Louisiana Creole Gumbo Restaurant catered to neighborhood workers before drug dealers moved in and the lights went out. Now the lights are on, says the restaurant's owner, Mr. Spencer, "and diners are returning at night."