

## **Genesis: beginnings**

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-15, 22-24

Psalms 23

Philippians 4:1–9

Matthew 22:1–14

### **Text: Genesis 2:15-17**

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

### **Introduction**

Have you ever started watching a movie in the middle missing the first 30 minutes? Or perhaps picked up a novel and start reading at chapter 10? The beginning sets the stage, introduces the characters, frames the story line and if you miss that beginning it is hard to make sense of certain aspects of later portions. Story telling is like that. If you jump in in the middle of the story without knowing how it starts, navigating the rest becomes challenging.

When we were born we landed in the middle of a story; a story the Bible says that God is telling about us and our existence. The Bible isn’t an encyclopedia to give us information about God; the Bible is a story of God’s encounter with humans. How that story begins sets the stage or describes the landscape on which this story unfolds. So why were you born? I know you understand how you were conceived—that isn’t my question. Why do we have existence at all? There are a number of competing stories about how it all begins and the story we embrace—knowingly or unknowingly—has a profound impact on how we live. Many today, for example, think of themselves as progressives. The backstory of that idea is that we humans began in primitive form and have been developing as we go, hence ‘progressing.’

The Bible also claims to be the true story of the world told at its proper depth because it is God’s story. Many have undertaken to show how the Biblical story makes eminent sense of the world we encounter. I commend to you the writings of C.S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton for those interested in exploring more on this point. We have just launched into an eight week study of the big story of the Bible; in the study we will see how the Bible’s sixty-six books fit together in this one story. Today I would like to probe a few things from the beginning of the

Bible's great story in its first book, Genesis. The book of beginnings. And in that to understand how this beginning informs us in our living today; to probe the nature of the landscape upon which the Bible says our lives unfold.

1. The first thing I invite you to note is that the existence of God is assumed. The Bible doesn't open by arguing for God's existence, it simply states it. The first line of the book of Genesis is a case in point, "In the beginning God..." There are two complementary creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis and everywhere we are told God did this or God said that. It simply states it. I invite you to reread these chapters sometime with this in your mind and note how the existence of God is matter-of-factly stated. In fact the entire Bible is like that. God's existence is assumed. God is.

It is not uncommon that when people are in a desperate situation there is this almost instinctive reaction to cry out in prayer. A reflex to call upon God. Even among people who have little or no knowledge of this great story of the Bible. Why is that? Is it simply a reaction to a feeling of helplessness and the attempt to shield one's self from the unbearable idea that life is ultimately pointless, as some claim. Or is it as the Bible story claims; the existence of God is self-evident and even if we haven't thought much about God the reality of his existence is somehow being perceived nonetheless.

As noted a moment ago, the Bible isn't an encyclopedia with information about God. It isn't like a typical mathematics textbook, for example, or any textbook probing some subject matter. It isn't the record of people studying the subject of God and recording their findings. It is the record of people who have been encountered by God. God's incursion into the lives of the authors of the Bible has stamped the reality of God's existence so indelibly in their beings they write in the way they do assuming God's existence. They are not in doubt. They know who it was that spoke and what God said and the meaning of God's address. About humans there is plenty to doubt, but about God scripture's authors are not in doubt. Understanding the nature of the Bible as the record of God's encounter with us humans, perhaps we might consider that our reaching out in desperate moments in prayer is, in fact, a response to God's encounter of us.

2. A second thing I invite you to note in the creation stories of Genesis is the way the concept of relationship is indispensable to this story God tells. In her book *Opening Israel's Scriptures* Old Testament scholar Ellen F. Davis writes the following about the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. "The concept of relationship comes to the fore already in the opening passage and governs its

interpretation. It is a mistake to read the passage as though it were intended to be a historical statement about the origin of various species. Those who use it as ammunition for the creationist-evolutionist debate (regardless of which side they may take) miss the point. Rather, this passage is a prose poem, an imaginatively rendered evocation of the Creator's relationship to all creatures, human and non-human, and also the relationships among creatures, with special focus on the human role within the complex created order."

So what does this have to do with living my life? For starters have you noticed that relationships are rather important to us in life. One of the long lasting detriments of the covid-19 pandemic and our reaction to it was isolation and the devastating impact of isolation on mental health. We note today in North America the increasing numbers of people who live alone. As our society has moved away from the Biblical story upon which Western society was founded is it a coincidence that living alone has increased? In a society that tells itself the story that the individual is the highest authority about a person it is not hard to imagine that isolated living increases.

You have heard me say many times that the chief characteristic of the living God is that he speaks. Reread the first three chapters of Genesis and you will see it is so. Underline the number of times you read, 'and God said.' Why do people speak? You speak to talk to someone even if it is to yourself. Speaking implies relationship. At the creation of the human we read, "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.'" Note the 'us' and the 'our' in God's speech. It implies what we Christians know from God's incursion into the world in Jesus—the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. God in God's triune reality is relational, the relationship that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Apostle John in his letter said that God is love. We know that love isn't a thing that exists apart from persons. It is people who love—it is a personal action. For God to be love, whose existence is prior to creation, then God's essence as love implies eternal relationship. And out of the overflow of this relationship of love the Father has for the Son and the Spirit, and the Son has for the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit has for the Father and the Son is the creation of the world. Relationship is embedded everywhere in the creation.

One of the most profound questions of the Genesis story is the understanding of what it means for the human to have been created in the image of God. What is it that distinguished the human from all the rest of God's creatures—creatures God loves, by the way. Whatever the full answer is it has to do with the fact that the

human is the recipient of God's personal address. God speaks to the human and human is constituted in such a way as to be able to respond. It is clear from the story that the humans—the woman and the man—know they have been addressed by God and understand the meaning of that address.

Do you not find this an amazing thought that God wants to talk with you and me. It is also clear that the human is the pinnacle of the creatures that God created. The human is given dominion over the rest. Does that mean that humans can do whatever they want with the creation? Some have thought so. Many people today who hold to a materialist story about the world—that this is all there is—think no limits should be set in human use of the world. But a close reading of the creation stories says otherwise. The human dominion was to serve God's purposes.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' "Good-and-evil" (virtually one word) is a semitism, a Hebrew expression meaning "everything, the sum total of human possibilities, everything that we can imagine." To know, in Hebrew is to have intimate acquaintance with, to experience. In forbidding us to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil God is warning us against intimate acquaintance with the sum total of everything that we can imagine. He is warning us against thinking we must experience or even may experience whatever we can dream up. In other words, God has set a limit to human self-extension; God has set a limit to our extending ourselves into anything at all that the mind and heart can invent. Why has God set such a limit? He sets such a limit just because he loves us; he sets this limit for our blessing. This side of the limit is blessing; the other side is curse.

Which brings me to a third thing I invite you to note in the Genesis story.

3. Creation starts out well but something goes terribly wrong. Throughout the ages philosophers and sages and pundits alike have tried to explain why they can see so much in the world that is good and yet other things that are so wrong. How does one reconcile the beauty of nature and its destructive force, the tenderness of love and the pains of hatred and indifference. In the Genesis story when that which is good is described it points in God's direction. When that which has gone wrong is described it points to us humans. The problem is in us, in me. The root of where things have gone wrong is human unbelief according to this Genesis story. The decision not to believe God but trust a lie about God instead.

In relationship to this event of things going wrong are the themes of God's judgement and mercy. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are referred to as pre-history. The stories told there shape the understanding of the landscape of the world in which we find ourselves and these themes of judgement and mercy run throughout them. When God confronts the man and the woman after they had eaten from the tree his word of judgement upon the serpent contains the first promise of a redeemer, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." They are cast out of Eden away from the tree of life so their fallen condition would not become unredeemable.

The story that follows is of how Cain murders his brother Abel. When God announced his judgement on Cain, Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear." Cain did not say that God's judgement was unjust. Cain fears that he will be a target for anyone to kill him. God says, "Not so. Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." No you don't get to treat the wrongdoer any way you want to.

Then comes the story of God's judgement in the flood because the wickedness of humankind was great, every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. At the end of that story is God's promise "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." And the rainbow was set in the sky as a sign of that promise.

And then the story of the tower of Babel. Humans sought to make a name for themselves—meaning we don't need God—and decided to build a city for themselves and a tower with its top in the heavens. It was to be a monument to human achievement—we can do anything. You noticed that God had to come down so he could see this tiny tower. We are told that God confused their language making communication impossible and thus scattering the people. Indeed God is merciful when he thwarts human intransigence and self-destructive ways.

The opening part of Genesis is global in its scope. In chapter 12 things change and the focus shifts to the personal and God's call of this man named Abraham. It is the beginning of that story in which God will bless all families of the earth through Abraham. It is the story that will find its climax when judgement and mercy will

meet at the cross of Jesus Christ. God will take the judgement of our sin upon himself which will issue in mercy for the sinner.