

Sermon for 13th June 2021, online

Genesis 1:1-5; 26-31; Psalm 8 – Origins and Meaning

All Bible quotations are from the NRSV

A couple of weeks ago I asked everyone at supper what came to mind if I said “origin story”. There was instantly a lot of chat about Iron Man and Spiderman and the Marvel Cinematic Universe; lots of these films are apparently origin stories. My children generally never cease to surprise and astonish me, but I’m afraid – with apologies to them – that on this occasion they responded exactly how I expected them to. I went on to ask what they thought about Genesis as an origin story, and then could see them all thinking, “Oh ok, Mum’s planning a sermon again.” They rarely find me surprising!

But although Genesis was not what my children thought of, it is the ultimate origin story, and in fact the Greek word “genesis” itself means origin or birth or coming into being. In Hebrew, the book is known by its first word, which as we have just heard translates “in the beginning”. Today I’m going to talk about what that beginning, those origins, mean for us now.

As people, we may well have questions about our origins; such curiosity is a natural part of being human. We often go to Scotland in the summer, and one year after we came home I spent a lot of time seeing how far back I could get in my Scottish grandmother’s family tree (the answer is the marriage of my great-great-great grandparents Neil Wilkie and Elizabeth Anderson in Bo’ness on the Firth of Forth in November 1803, any further back seems to be rather more educated guesswork than fact!). What, I suppose, I was trying to do was to make some sort of sense of where I am from, and with that I think comes reflection on where I am going. But the ultimate answer to where we are all from, or where we are all going, does not come from trawling through websites like Ancestry and Scotland’s People, useful as they are, but from the story of creation and God’s purpose for us, which we are shown from the beginning.

The first chapter of Genesis 1, whether you understand it literally or view it as a God-inspired but human explanation of the glory of creation, seems to me to present us all with a vocation or a duty. God offers us “dominion” over all living things (Gen 1:26,28; Ps 8:6) and that sounds rather sinister. Perhaps everything is simply there for us to exploit. I would argue that that is very much not what is intended. God has instead given us a vocation of stewardship and care for the world and everything – and everyone – in it. We may be the ones

with the honour of being created in the image of God – of which more in a minute – but animals and people were blessed in the same way by God at creation (Gen 1:22, 28), and people were charged to eat plants, not animals; it was not a predatory or violent world. Therefore, we have a God-given responsibility to care for the world around us, and to do so in a way that is pleasing to Him. World Environment Day on 5th June reminded us just how important it is that we live up to this calling, faced as we are with the crisis that is global heating, which gives us a stark warning of the need to adapt to protect the world. Covid-19, meanwhile, has reinforced the importance of our care for each other both on a personal level to those immediately around us, but also as a nation, with the obligation not just to help people who live in this country, but to help the poorer countries of the world cope with the pandemic and its aftermath. No-one is safe until everyone is safe.

It is an extraordinary gift that we have been chosen to have this vocation to care for the earth. We may well feel utterly unworthy of such a responsibility, and amazed that God thinks we deserve it. That is certainly the case for me, and I would suggest for the Psalmist too: “what are human beings that you are mindful of them?” (8:4). But God made us in his image – “a little lower than [himself]” according to Psalm 8 (8:5) – so intended us to be his representatives on earth, the beings with whom he could communicate and who would carry out his bidding, awesome and daunting as that may be for us. It is important to note that in chapter 1 of Genesis – unlike in chapter 2, which has a quite different narrative of the creation - man and woman are created at the same time, are both said to be in the image of God, and are presented as equal partners. (There are plenty of images of God as a mother in the Bible, by the way, for example as a bear defending her cubs in Hosea (13:8), and the rather gentler image in Matthew (23:37) and Luke (13:34) of Jesus as a mother hen wanting to gather the people of Jerusalem as if they were chicks.) To return to the idea of partnership, men and women, no matter who they are or where they are from, thus share in this duty of care God gave to us.

As well as being a source of responsibility, our vocation to care for the Earth is one in which we should rejoice. It shows God’s love for and trust in us, and yes we will all let Him down and get things wrong – that happened pretty much from the start, after all- but He trusts us to strive to make things right again. The question we need to ask of ourselves is how we respond when things go wrong, or other options seem more tempting – do we turn away from our calling, or turn back to God?

The key to fulfilling our vocation, and not turning away from it, of course, is God himself. He is the centre of everything, the creator and source of everything, the designer of the world. As it says in Revelation, “you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power; for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” (4:11) I would argue that the most important point about the events described at the beginning of Genesis is not the length of time it took God to create the world - after all, “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day” (2 Peter 3:8) so God’s concept of time is nothing like ours- nor is how he did it. Instead, the key question, I think, is with what intent He made the world. It seems to me that He created the world out of love, which is a complete contrast to other ancient creation stories where the world emerges from conflict between gods. Indeed, in the Babylonian creation story the earth and sky are made from the body of the god defeated in battle.

Our world, however, is not born out of strife but is designed to be a place of harmony and peace, hence the blessing of both animals and people and the provision of all that was needed for life to thrive. The world is designed to be good, to be harmonious, to be cared for, to be shared and not to be exploited. That is the wonderful core of creation. When God finished, He saw that His work was “very good” (Gen 1:31) – this does not refer to people, who in Genesis 1 are the final part of creation, but to His craftsmanship as a whole. He had created order from chaos, showing that He can transform anything; and we should take comfort from the thought that if He can transform “the formless void” (Gen 1: 2) into our amazing world, He can make our formless mortal lives amazing too.

God was not alone at the creation. The Holy Spirit was there, as a “wind from God which swept over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2). To go back to the male and female images of God, the Hebrew word used here for spirit is feminine. The Spirit is often present at the beginning of events, as a dove at Christ’s baptism which marked the start of his ministry (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22), and as “a sound like the rush of a violent wind” at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) at the beginning of the church. And also present at creation, even though not directly mentioned in Genesis, was Jesus: “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:2-3). Paul reinforced this point, writing to the Colossians that “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have

been created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). The whole Trinity was there at the beginning; our origins lie in this threefold wonder.

It is not only our origins which are extraordinary, however; our future can be – will be - too if we trust in God and fulfil the charge he gave us to care for the world and everything in it. The very beginning and the very end of the Bible link beautifully; God’s perfect original creation will be remade as “a new heaven and a new earth” as described in Revelation (21 & 22). How we respond to God’s trust in and love for us is up to each of us individually. We will best be able to fulfil our vocation and make the world the glorious place for everyone and everything in it, that God originally intended, if we respond wholeheartedly to His loving call that He made on us at the beginning. Everything must begin and end with God.

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