

In the Beginning God

“God saw all that he had made,
and it was very good.”

Genesis 1:31

Good stories are told, not explained. There is an art to telling a story well. Storytellers give us a sense of direction and fill us with a sense of drama. We feel the energy of the plot. They help us to identify with the characters and they keep our emotions in play with the meaning of the story. Some people don't tell stories well, because they're always interrupting themselves with unimportant details. They distract themselves and frustrate their listeners. They lose their train of thought and forget where they are going with their story. A good story doesn't trail away from the storyline and get lost in petty details or bogged down in uncalled for explanations. Stories should be told with the message in mind from the beginning.

It's one thing to tell a story well and another thing to hear a story well. Good story tellers need to do their part, but listeners have a role to play as well. The precocious listener who always interrupts the story with idle questions and peculiar curiosity never really hears the message of the story. They hear the opening chapters of Genesis and all they can think about is how long the days were? Are these 24 hour days or great epochs? How did Cain find a wife—where did she come from? When they hear God, say, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness . . . ,” they are ready to discuss the Trinity. And as every believer knows the Triune God is one of the most important truths to affirm, but now is not the time to debate this truth. It will only interrupt the story. We need to be vigilant about staying in the story and not distracting ourselves from the main truth of what God is proclaiming to us in his Word. If we debate the identity of the snake in Genesis 3, or the origin of the unique beings described in Genesis 6, we are approaching Genesis in the wrong way, and we will go from one debate to another, never getting to the story.

It is wrong to assume that students of the Bible know the Salvation History story. They often bring a heartfelt sincerity to their studies, but not a great awareness of

the dynamic of the Gospel story. If a new student was asked to open the Bible at the beginning and explain the unfolding course of salvation history they would probably defer, claiming that they had come to seminary to learn precisely how to do that, how to tell the Gospel story from cover to cover. This is where we disappoint students right off the bat. By focusing on prolegomena and background issues seminaries have a way of exhausting students and preventing them from beginning at the beginning. Good teachers know this and guard against it. They defy the scribal propensity to overwhelm students with the complexities and intricacies of scholarly opinions. They do not teach as if it were their primary duty to debunk students of their intellectual naivete, but instead lead students into the powerful story of God's revelation. There is a place for careful explanation where interpretations are weighed, but only after the Genesis story is understood in the flow of salvation history. First of all, we want to be concerned with the primary focus of Genesis, what the Spirit-inspired author and the Spirit-enabled editors had in mind when they wrote Genesis. Later we can go back to the perplexing, and often complex, side issues we uncover along the way.

Wisdom dictates that we first hear the story before dissecting the text. By the time many seminarians plow through the scholarly introduction of a biblical book, including authorship, sources, date, setting, redaction criticism, exegetical problems, etc., they have lost the intellectual and spiritual energy to hear the story, much less proclaim it! These academic questions and concerns can be important, but their priority should be reversed. Begin with the story, revel in the truth and when once that is internalized in the soul, turn to the technicalities. It is hard to proclaim what we have been trained to see as textual conundrums and scholarly debates. To use an analogy, seminary professors are trying to teach advanced auto mechanics to people who haven't even gotten their driver's license. Textual experts need to be careful with the biblical story. Their love of grammar and syntax may cause them to miss the tone and texture, and especially the truth of this real life story. Scholars can exegete a biblical passage, and pastors can work up sermons, but yet never really tell the story.

Good storytellers are selective about what they say and how they say it. The apostle John finished his Spirit-inspired version of the gospel with a disclaimer of sorts. "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (21:25). John made no claim to being exhaustive. How could he? But if John felt this way about Jesus' life and ministry, how much more

did Moses and his editors feel this way about Genesis. The need to be selective and focused was obvious.

In the Beginning

We should be resolute about beginning right where Genesis begins. Whatever lies before this beginning is only hinted at as the story unfolds. There is absolutely nothing before the fullness of God, and yet we know from what the Bible tells us that there are beings and events outside of our time frame. Isaiah and Ezekiel imply this with their description of the expulsion from heaven of angelic beings who turned demonic (Is 14:12-15; Ez 28:11-17). But this poetic prophecy is intentionally vague. We were never meant to be caught up in it. It is enough for perceptive people to realize that evil personalities and forces are not limited to this space/time world (Eph 6:12; Rev 12:7-9). It is not our job to explain the origin of evil. Evil appears sometime before the special beginning of Genesis 1:1. Evil lies outside of God's creation, as a privation of his goodness, outside of God's will and beyond human invention (James 1:13). It is neither a rationale nor an excuse for humanity's fall into evil.

We begin in Genesis because the Spirit of Christ makes us into a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17). It is only because of the mercy of God and the renewing of our minds that we are able to begin at this beginning (Rom 12:2). It is logical for those who place their trust in nature alone to recoil at the first line of the Bible, but for those who "by faith... understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible," it makes perfect sense (Heb 11:3). The person who believes that there is no God can begin their story anywhere they chose, but for those who believe in Christ this is where we begin. "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:16-17).

To begin our story with Genesis 1:1 implies a hidden spiritual discipline. Many of us are in the thoughtless habit of telling our story with a secular slant. Some talk as if they were masters of the universe, in control of their destiny, while others lament their vulnerability, feeling like victims of despair. In either case, the secular nature of our self-perception comes out in our story telling. Practically speaking, we tend to talk about our lives as if there was no God. Whatever the

pride or pathos of our past may be, faith in Christ reorients our personal story and gives us a new beginning. We begin the way the Bible begins, by intentionally orienting our story to the will and work of God. The apostles were true to this reorientation when they emphasized predestination and election. To be chosen "in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph 1:4) was another way of emphasizing, "In the beginning God..." To say that the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ our Savior, "was slain from the creation of the world," is to stress, "In the beginning God.." (Rev 13:8).

What shall we say then about the life we lived before we knew Christ? When we would have glibly told our life story without the mere mention of God, let alone confessing, "In the beginning God..." A good example is the apostle Paul. Undoubtedly, God used the apostle's preconversion experiences, his scholarship in the Scriptures, his family heritage, and his vocation as a Pharisee, for Kingdom purposes. But Paul totaled them up as a loss and considered them rubbish that he might gain Christ (Phil 3:8). Like Paul, all of our confidence in the flesh amounts to "nothing." Apart from God everything is chaotic. It is formless, empty and dark.

Every new person in Christ can read Genesis 1:1-2 on two levels. For how God created the universe out of nothing is how he created us anew. We don't begin this story to simply explain the past or enter into debate about the origins of the world. We were not meant to hear the Genesis account and feel compelled to come to its defense. The whole story is indeed under attack from cover to cover. In fact everything about the biblical story is challenged today, but God hasn't employed us to be his defense attorneys. We shouldn't labor under a self-imposed obligation. People can sense a defensive spirit or a dogmatic approach, but neither response is justified if we truly hear the story. Let Genesis speak for itself. Let God's Word free us up to behold his glory. It's not our job to defend God's honor. Rightly understood, this story doesn't box us in intellectually, but liberates us to see the world as God intended us to see it. Genesis is not like a complex calculus problem that needs to be solved, but a powerful story that must be heard and believed. I wonder what the outcome would have been if the early church fathers had been more influenced by the God of Genesis and less influenced by Greek philosophical notions of God. What we find in Genesis is the God who relates to creation as Creator in surprising and dynamic ways. God's linguists come to know and appreciate that Genesis is not a puzzle to be figured out but a true story to be told with passion and purpose.

The Voice of God

If we listen to the beginning of the story we can't miss the fact that the subject of the story is God. We pick up the pattern right away. We hear over and over again, some twenty times, with only slight variation, "And God said...God created...God made...God saw...God called." These poetic harmonies evoke wonder and worship. There is a rhythm to God's creating, making, evaluating, defining and blessing. The insistence that nature alone is responsible for the universe flies in the face of all that science is revealing. The case for personal agency and intelligent design is everywhere evident. The myth of the self-made man or woman is exposed. We are not the masters of the universe or the captains of our souls that we like to imagine. Nor is the goodness of God's creation so obscured today by evil that we cannot see the beauty and order and majesty of creation. The nihilist and cynic may insist on seeing only the emptiness and darkness, but God's verdict stands: "And God saw that it was good."

This puts all of our effort into a new light. We are born into a world filled with reason and rhythm that deserves to be respected. All of our work was meant to be in partnership with God. It's not just the farmer and the surgeon who were meant to be aware of this. The refrain, "And there was evening, and there was morning..." reminds us that we sleep while God's Word sustains the universe (Heb 1:3) and awake to a new day in God's world. One day in seven is set aside to rest and celebrate God's goodness. God set the example by establishing a day of rest, a weekly reminder to us that we rest in God.

Creation was and is the result of the will of God. It was intentional, not accidental; it was by design, not default. The relationship between the Creator and creation is not explained or analyzed. God created (five times) and made (five times), but the verbs of choice refer to God's speech (fifteen times). The irreversible, binding link is established through language. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. The science behind this simple command was meant to be so outrageous that it would forever evoke praise and worship. In Genesis it is stated for the sole purpose of drawing our attention to God's permission for creation to be. God's authoritative tone is not authoritarian. There is a difference between dictating and deciding, calling forth and imposing. God is under no obligation or necessity to do this and there is no resistance to God's invitation, "Let there be..." There are no

magical incantations or clever embellishments; only simple, calm commands summoning existence into being.

We cannot help but be impressed with creation's response to the voice of God. The calmness of these straightforward commands is in contrast to Job's description of the voice of God as thunder (37:5). The psalmist said the voice of the Lord could shatter the cedars of Lebanon (Ps 29:5) and the prophets said it could shatter nations (Is 30:31). "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jer 23:29). Whereas creation can be called forth calmly, the hardness of human hearts provokes the voice of the Lord. We know how frustrating it is when we are not listened to, when our voice is not heard. But do we listen to the voice of God? The speech of God calls creation into existence but does it get our attention? Does the Word of the Lord set our lives in order and receive the same obedient response that creation gives to God? Creation itself should challenge us to passionate listening.

What is especially striking about God's Word right from the start is that it cannot be voided, nullified, counterfeited or in any way rendered useless. What God says goes. "It will not return to me empty," says the Lord, "but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Is 55:11). We are used to the discrepancy between words and deeds; the gap between what is said and what is done is great. From this contradiction springs all types of deception, litigation, and disillusionment. We have come to accept it and joke about it in politics. Couples are particularly sensitive to it in marriage, and parents are vigilant about detecting it in their children. All forms of manipulation, from overt propaganda to subtle forms of public relations, play on the inconsistency between speech and action.

This discrepancy is a huge factor in our culture's resistance to hearing the Word of God and to trusting one another. We are tempted to fill the gap between word and deed with images that define success and style and sensitivity, images that lack both true words and real deeds. When there is no dependable connection between what we say and what we do, images take over and script our speech and turn our actions into a performance. Yet the expectation of communication and communion that connects words and deeds is deep within our souls. It is in the character of our souls to want to hear truth and to be true. The Author of Life, whose speech creates and sustains the universe has endowed us with this built-in longing. It is one of the reasons why our hearts remain restless until they find their rest in God.

The climax of creation week is the creation of human beings. There is dialogue within the Godhead, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..." and there is dialogue with man, male and female, "God blessed them and said to them, `Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it..." Of all things made only man is addressed. Everything else is "hard-wired," governed by laws and instincts, but human beings are entrusted with responsibility and stewardship over creation. They are made for communion with God. What sets these image-bearers of God apart from the rest of creation is that they have souls and are endowed with the gifts of communication and language. Those who truly hear this story cannot help but talk and act differently.

In the Garden

The harmonies of Genesis chapter one, composed of rhythms of grace heard throughout creation, are now filled in with the colorful melodies of human fellowship, responsibility and intimacy. The story moves from the cosmos to the garden; from the God of the Universe to the more personal name for God, Lord God, the God of the Covenant (Yahweh). Eden means "delight" and it was as its name implied, perfect. It was a place that lacked nothing, but had everything in abundance. There was plenty of water and an abundance of resources. The Garden of Eden was not man's achievement, but God's gift to man and his partnership with man.

The gift came with instructions which God carefully spelled out in a three part message. First, man was entrusted with a vocation--a calling. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (2:15). Second, man was given permission to enjoy and benefit from the Garden. "And the Lord God commanded the man, `You are free to eat from any tree in the garden'" (2:16). Third, man received an unambiguous prohibition. "But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (2:17). Man was expected to honor his vocation, explore his freedom, and respect the prohibition. It is human nature, I suppose, to concentrate on the prohibition and neglect man's calling and commissioning. We easily forget the respect and freedom that God offers.

These two trees in the middle of the Garden stand for life in God and life apart from God. The tree of life is a metaphor in the book of Proverbs for wisdom, righteousness and hope: "She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who

lay hold of her will be blessed" (Prov 3:18; cf. 11:30;13:12). In the book of Revelation, eating the fruit of the tree of life is a reward for those who have overcome in Christ, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God"(Rev 2:7; cf. 22:1-5). Some have suggested that the tree of life has sacramental value, as a symbol of the life-giving grace of God. Given the fact that God gave man the freedom to eat "from any tree in the garden," except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we may assume he ate of the tree of life. However, there was no magical value to eating the fruit from the tree of life. Eternal life was no more assured in eating from this tree than eating the bread and drinking the cup in Holy Communion.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil stands for human autonomy and a denial of our God-given limits. If man wants to assume the prerogative of God and decide what is good and evil this is the tree he eats from, even though God has prohibited him from doing so. God's "No" is clearly for our own good. Henri Blocher states, "The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents ingratitude and rebellion against God's provision, the absurd pretension to abolish dependence and the disastrous misuse of the privilege of being freely accountable to God. It represents our deviation into death and the absurd" (Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p.133).

To help illustrate this, picture a happy mother baking cookies with her daughter. They're having a great time. The mother patiently lets her little girl help her by spooning the dough on the cookie sheet. When she pulls the cookie sheet from the oven she warns her daughter not to touch it because it's very hot. She gives her daughter a cookie and puts the baking tray out of reach. She repeats her warning and then turns her back for a second. True to form, the little girl, with a cookie in one hand, climbs up and grabs the burning sheet with her free hand. The tree symbolizes our insistence on choosing for ourselves what is good and evil and refusing to listen to the voice of God. The prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was absolutely necessary in order for man to know his limits as creature.

The second creation story, which describes the human impact of creation, offers a poetic picture of intimacy between husband and wife. What began with the transcendent majesty of God, the Lord of the Universe who sovereignly calls the cosmos into existence, ends with an endearing picture of God's concern for our relational wholeness. "The Lord God said, `It is not good for the man to be alone.

I will make a helper suitable for him"(2:18). In the past some have seen the creation of woman as an afterthought and used it to defend the subordination of women. But just the opposite is true. "Woman is the crowning event in the narrative and the fulfillment of humanity" (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p.51). God's blessing could not have been greater and for us to in any way disparage or diminish God's creation gift is to discredit the wisdom and beauty of God's creation.

God risked a great deal in the lavishness and abundance of his wonderful creation. God has never played it safe, the power and majesty of creation ended up being worshiped in place of God. The all knowing Lord of the universe was not surprised when people made idols of the sun and stars. The beauty of creation, from the stars to sex, coupled with human intelligence and freedom reflects the kind of creation and fellowship God took pride in. "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (1:31). The Cross of Jesus Christ, the sacrifice of the Incarnate One, was the ultimate expression of divine risk, but it is in keeping with the God who gave us everything in the beginning.

Stay in the Story

The purpose of Bible studies, preaching and theological education is to help people understand and share the story of God's Salvation History. To do that we have to insist on staying in the story in every conceivable way, from our personal identity to our academic work. We must let the story shape every part of our lives from ethics to worship. To stay in the story is the same thing as abiding in Christ. We cannot tell this story well if any part of who we are is left out of the story. We are called to be God's linguists, entrusted with the responsibility of sharing the Gospel story from one generation to another and from one culture to another. Genesis begins at the beginning. God is God. This is God's story before it is our story, but by God's grace we enter into the story and it becomes our story too. It is impossible for God's linguist to remain coolly detached from the meaning of the story. The biblical text is not a specimen to be dissected but the source of all wisdom and devotion.

The difference between an academic linguist and the tribal linguist in northern Ghana is so great that the western linguist cannot figure out what if any comparison exists between them. Just how an African story-teller came to be called a linguist is a mystery to the professional linguist. But the nuances between

the two definitions are especially meaningful when it comes to seminary education. On the one hand we have biblical scholars who are like western style linguists. They are Scripture specialists, trained in the technicalities of the text, who in turn train their students in the various strategies of criticism. Because their work focuses on the technicalities of the text they can continue to do their work without regard for a passion for Christ. On the other hand we have pastor-teachers who go beyond observing the text to telling the story. They are the poet-linguists of the Word, in step with the Spirit, using the language of Scripture to tell the truest of true stories—the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Genesis sets the tone for this story. It offers us direction in how God's Salvation History story is to be perceived and proclaimed. Genesis is neither argumentative nor apologetic. It is declarative. The Word of God shatters ignorance and speculation and fills the void with revelation. Everything outside of this beginning is summed up in a line, "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep." Pity the linguist who opens up the early chapters of Genesis and sees only a host of critical problems and feels no overwhelming joy to proclaim, "God said, 'Let there be...'" But, praise God for true linguists who love to tell the story and never stop saying, "Thus says the Lord..."