

“God’s World”
Genesis 1:26-31
April 11, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

We are beginning today a series of 13 sermons surveying the history of the Old Testament. I have chosen 13 key events that need to be understood if we are to grasp the meaning of the Old Testament. In order to understand the Bible, it is necessary to have a familiarity with such things as creation, fall, the call of Abraham, the conquest of the land, the Davidic dynasty and the exile. You can’t understand the Bible without a knowledge of these things and their significance.

The importance of knowing the key Old Testament events involves more than our understanding. They are also important for living. Let me explain what I mean by that. The Bible comes to us in the form of a story, not as a series of theological propositions. The New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has said that “a story... is... the best way of talking about the way the world actually is.” Further, it is only as we are able to put ourselves in this story that we will know how we are to live our lives. A philosopher by the name of Alasdair MacIntyre said it like this. “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story do I find myself a part?’” An important part of living well in God’s world is to know God’s story.

Before we begin our exploration of the Bible’s story, let me mention the two competing stories that are most common today. Interestingly, both of these competing stories can be seen in the recent blockbuster movie, *Avatar*. The movie is about a clash of two civilizations with different stories. One of these is a western-type civilization that values technology and progress. The other is a non-technological civilization of people called the Na’vi. They are pantheistic in their outlook, believing in the divinity of nature. These two civilizations portray the two dominant stories that have shaped the past two hundred years in America, and the two stories that compete with the story of the Bible. The enlightenment story is featured in the technological civilization of the movie. It believes that human reason is the ultimate power in the world, and that it is through science and technology alone, apart from God, that humanity can build a perfect world. The other story makes nature, not reason, to be the ultimate good. It sees technology as a bad thing, and values unity with nature. Both of these stories have elements of truth in them. But as ultimate stories, they both fall well short of the big story told by the Bible. And those who place themselves in these stories will find themselves not flourishing. We flourish as we see ourselves in the big story God reveals in the Bible. We begin today at the beginning of that story, which features three elements of God’s world.

I. Its Origin

All the great ancient Near Eastern cultures had their creation stories. The Babylonian story describes gods who create humanity as the servants of the gods, to wait on them and keep them happy. Our culture has its own creation story, one in which the forces of random chance, operating over long periods of time, produce life as we know it currently. Genesis 1-2 is designed to instruct Israel about the true origin of the world, in order that they might be protected from the errors of the peoples around them. So, for example, many of the people in Canaan, the land God gave to Israel, worshiped the sun and the moon. There are words for both sun and moon in the Hebrew language, but they are not used in Genesis 1. Instead, he speaks of **“the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night”** (1:16). And these lights were created by Israel’s God.

There are several qualities of this Creator God that stand out in this passage. I notice first his great power, seen primarily in the power of his word. God spoke the heavens and the earth into existence, seen in this repeated pattern, **“And God said, ‘Let there be...’ and there was.”** God is portrayed here as a king issuing decrees. We also see his power in his naming of things. He called the dry land “earth” and the waters he called “Seas.” To be able to name something speaks of authority. Parents get to name their children, but not other people’s children. God has power and authority over all his creation.

We also see that God is an orderly God. The movement of this chapter is from unformed to order. In the beginning, the earth was **“without form and void”** (1:2). But God proceeds in his work of creation to bring order. We read almost every day of God separating things into an orderly pattern. He separates the light from the darkness (v. 4), the sky from the sea (v. 7), and the land from the sea. He separates the plants and animals according to their kind. He creates an orderly world.

This Creator God is a personal God, doing the kinds of things that people do. God speaks, sees, plans and evaluates. He is a God in relationship with others, which we see principally in his creation of man. When he says, **“Let us make man in our image,”** he is talking to someone other than man, indicating a relationship with whomever this refers to. Some see this as an early biblical reference to the Trinity. That’s possible. The other alternative is that it refers to other heavenly creatures like angels. God also makes it clear that he intends to be in relationship with humanity. Verse 28 records for the first time God speaking *to* something he has created. God speaks *to* the man and the woman he has created in his image.

Finally, he is a playful God. One of the repeated phrases in this chapter is the phrase, **“And God saw that it was good,”** an evaluation offered during the

creative work of each day. The material world is a good world, made that way by God's hand. He is a fun-loving God, creating a realm for the enjoyment of all his creation.

II. Its Inhabitants

Everything in this passage moves toward the creation of man on the sixth day. Note that the six days of creation are divided into two groups of three each. On the first three days of creation, God creates the realms for earth's inhabitants, and on days four through six the inhabitants for those realms. It all reaches a climax on the sixth day, when humanity is made in the image of God. We see the uniqueness of humanity even in the language used of their creation by God. With everything else in creation, God said something like **"Let the earth bring forth living creatures"** (v. 24). Now he speaks more directly, **"Let us make man in our image."** I want to look in this point at what it means to be in the image of God, and in the next point we will consider the work God calls his image-bearers to undertake.

An image is a likeness of something. We are designed to be small-scale images of God. We are not God ourselves, but are similar to God. Mankind is unique among the entire creation in this regard, for we are the only part of creation of whom this is said. It is God's plan to fill the earth with his image bearers. The Old Testament scholar, Gerhard von Rad, makes an interesting point here.

Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem. He is really only God's representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God's claim to dominion over the earth.

What does it mean, though, to be created in the image of God? The text indicates that it means primarily two things: relationship and rule. First, we are created as relational beings, because God is a relational God. We have a capacity for relationship that is unmatched in the rest of creation. The most fundamental of all our relationships is the one with God. We get something of a glimpse of this in chapter 3, after Adam and Eve sinned. We read in verse 8 that Adam and Eve **"heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day"** (3:8). God is portrayed here as a neighbor stopping by at the end of the day for a little conversation and fellowship. We are built from the ground up for fellowship with God. As Augustine famously said in his *Confessions* long ago, we are made for God, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in him.

We are also designed for relationship with others. Notice the language of the text. **“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”** Humans weren’t the only ones God created male and female, but it is pointed out here to highlight this relational feature. We were designed for community and not isolation.

The second aspect of being in the image of God is to rule and govern, like God rules. That brings us to our next point.

III. Its Development

Though everything God created was “very good,” it was unfinished, even after the sixth day. It was God’s intention to leave it this way in order that his image-bearers might complete the work as they fill and rule God’s world. Its development would be completed as they obeyed the command of verse 28. **“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”** Obeying this command will have us do the same thing God does. Remember that he took the formless, empty world of verse 2 and brought order to it. Now his image-bearers are told to do the same thing on a smaller scale. The word “vice-regent” is often used to describe this God-given role of subduing and having dominion. A vice-regent is like an assistant king. God has made little kings out of each of us, and invited us to work like the big King.

What is involved in this work of ruling the earth? We see Adam and Eve doing two things as part of their ruling: tending the garden and naming and classifying the animals. They worked both with their hands and their minds. Someone has said that the Garden of Eden was more like a national park than what we typically think of as a garden. It had rivers flowing through it, and seemed to be quite extensive. It was in a wild form, and Adam and Eve were given the task of developing it for the purpose of human flourishing. They were also given the task of naming the animals. As we’ve already mentioned, naming in the Bible indicates authority. It also would have required the mental work of classifying the animals, noticing similarities and differences between the animals. Again, it is the bringing of order out of an original state of wildness.

There is a great deal we learn from this. First, work, like relationships, is also a fundamental part of being human. The original paradise was filled with the kind of work that required exertion. We know their work required exertion because Adam and Eve had need of rest every seventh day. Our future life in the new earth will also include work. One of the applications of this is that as long as we have the physical and mental capacity for work, we should work. Work is not the same thing as a job and a paycheck, so I don’t mean that what

we traditionally think of as retirement is wrong. As long as God gives the ability, retirement should include work and not be spent exclusively in leisure.

Another lesson we learn about work here is that it involves us of necessity with other people, simply because the command given to humanity is too big for any one person. We need one another. In a book about work, Lester DeKoster writes, “the difference between life in a wilderness and here is work. In the wilderness, you must do everything for yourself. But civilization is sharing in the work of others.” He then proceeds to offer the simple chair as an example of our interdependence. If you had to create a chair without any resources from others, it would be nigh to impossible. If you didn’t even have any tools, you would have to make your own. But how could you make a tool with no steel or tool-making machinery? God’s central command to subdue the earth leads us to an interdependence. One of the applications of this is our need to see the contribution to human flourishing made by our particular piece of this overall task, no matter how small it may seem to us. We all have a need to see how our particular effort contributes to the big picture, and Genesis 1:28 provides us with that big picture.

Since for most of us our work consumes a large percentage of our waking hours, let’s take time for one more application. The view of work portrayed here keeps us from two very common mistakes people make in our culture. The first mistake is to elevate our work to a higher place than it ought to have and see it as our identity. This is the view that says, “I am what I do.” That easily leads to becoming a workaholic or to despair if things are not going well at work. The second mistake is to lower our work to a place beneath the dignity God gives to it here and see it merely as a way to make a living. We work so we can pursue our weekend hobbies and retire as early as possible. This often leads to shoddiness and cynicism in our work.

CONCLUSION:

Don’t you long for a world such as the one portrayed here? Someone told me of reading that some people experienced depression after seeing the movie *Avatar*, because they saw the world portrayed there as being both inviting and unattainable. There were elements of that world that were inviting. The paradise of Genesis 1-2 is even more so, with human community flourishing in every way it was designed to flourish. But as we are going to see next week, that world was lost to us in the sin of Adam. The good news, though, is that another Adam has come, our Lord Jesus Christ. In every way, he restores to us what the first Adam lost. Adam lost paradise for himself and his offspring through his disobedience. Jesus restores our relationship with God through his obedience in going to the cross. And now he makes of any who trust in him a new creation. Just as in Genesis 1, he speaks his powerful word, and we become, in Paul’s word, a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).