

**Every Story Has a Beginning
Genesis 1-3**

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Perhaps it goes without saying that in churches like ours, people typically no longer read these stories in a literalistic way. We do not believe that the world was created in six twenty-four hour days six thousand or so years ago. We do not think of Adam and Eve as the original humans beings from whom the entirety of the human race is descended. We do not imagine that the Garden of Eden is an actual place somewhere in the world, still guarded by angels with flaming swords. We understand that these are ancient myths that have been preserved by our faith tradition for thousands of years. We understand that even though these stories do not correspond to scientific or historical fact, they nonetheless convey deep and profound truth.

If you were to read the Bible from cover to cover, this would be the beginning of the story. From Genesis to Revelation, this story tells of a pristine creation that is tarnished by the infection of sin. Paradise in the presence of God is lost, which sets up the rest of the story as an attempt to return to that paradise. Along the way, there are many twists and turns, many characters who are introduced as paradigms of how—and how not—to follow the ways of God. Eventually, the longing for redemption and reconciliation is answered in the person of Jesus Christ. And at the very end of this complex story, in a colorful vision recorded in the last book of the Bible, a new heaven and a new earth are created to replace the old, and humans beings once again dwell in paradise with their God.

This is one way to read the Bible. It is a valid way, but it is not the only way. It is just as valid to recognize that the Bible is not a single story at all. It is not even a single book. Rather, it

is a collection of books brought together as something more like a library. In the ancient world, this would have been more visibly clear because each book of the Bible would be on an individual scroll. You can imagine a shelving unit of cubby holes, each one containing one of these scrolls. The invention of the codex, a way to write—and much later, print—texts on pages and bind them together between two covers changed the way we understand and read the Bible. You can be sure that reading the Bible on screens, some as small as the cell phones we carry in our pockets, will change how we read the Bible once again.

If we disentangle the unity that is imposed on these writings when they are collected together into a single volume, we can appreciate each book on its own. Following this approach, we discover that these foundational stories in Genesis were not the first parts of the Bible to be written down. Indeed, it may be the case that some of what we have just heard was written down hundreds of years after the earliest writings of the Bible were created. They were placed at the beginning—naturally enough because they talk about beginnings—by a later editor who brought together a variety of narratives from Israel’s sacred stories to form a coherent story that begins with the creation of the world and culminates in the creation of God’s chosen nation, ancient Israel. To this core story was later added further historical writings, prophetic utterances, poetic liturgies and songs, books of wisdom, and apocalyptic visions. After the time of Jesus, these writings were supplemented with stories about him and the early church, including letters and writings from the earliest Christians. Together, these form a remarkable library of sacred literature that testifies to an incredible faith journey that spans centuries, a faith journey that continues to this day among the communities of faith that read these texts as living witnesses to the presence of God in our world.

I call these stories myths, not because I think they are not true, but because they speak deep truth through powerful yet fantastic stories. It is a tremendous category error to look to these stories for scientific or historical information. These are stories that were told long before our modern understandings of science and history. They were told to evoke wonder about the majesty of God and God's creation. They were told to explain the world as the ancient Israelites understood it.

The influential sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, in his classic book *The Sacred Canopy*, contends that religion is instrumental in our cultural and social processes of building and maintaining worldviews. Religion gives meaning to a world that otherwise might seem meaningless. Religion helps us order our experience of the world in such a way that is both comprehensible and manageable. Religion legitimates relationships and social orders that bind us together and regulate society. The mythology of a religious tradition—whatever form it might take—plays a key role in all of these functions.¹

We can think about this in our own context. Richard Hughes, a professor of religion at Pepperdine University, has written a fascinating book called *Myths America Lives By*, in which he outlines five myths that shape American identity.² The “myth of the Chosen People” was developed in the colonial period to suggest that God chose the United States to bring special blessings to the world. The “myth of Nature's Nation” posits that the American understanding of human rights is grounded in the very fabric of nature. Variations of this myth also argued that certain peoples—Native Americans and Africans chief among them—were by nature

¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990).

² Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 1st ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

inferior and therefore destined to be dominated by European Americans. The “myth of the Christian Nation” came from the period of the Second Great Awakening and portrays the United States as a nation shaped by a particular understanding of the Christian gospel. The “myth of the Millennial Nation” positions the United States as the bringer of freedom to the world. Finally, the “myth of the Innocent Nation” developed from our participation in two world wars, proposes that we are the innocent and righteous nation fighting evil in the world. All of these combine to shape our national identity in often unconscious but nonetheless pervasive ways. They support our greatest accomplishments and our greatest mistakes. Manifest destiny, the enslavement of Africans, the continued oppression of African Americans, particular aspects of our foreign policy, and a widespread sense of American exceptionalism are all supported by these myths.

The mythology of Genesis functioned in quite similar ways for ancient Israel. A clear intent of the six day creation story is to provide an alternative understanding of the world and divinity that counters the popular Mesopotamian myths of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. As we follow the story as it continues through Noah and into Abraham and his descendents, we will discover the mythologized claim that God has chosen one nation out of the entire world to be God’s special people. These stories were told by ancient Israel to shape their understanding of who they were in relationship to their neighbors. They provided a self identity and a lens through which to understand others.

So, if these stories were told to help create and maintain the worldview of ancient Israel, what do we do when we find ourselves in conflict with that worldview? The cosmologies of the two creation accounts in Genesis bear no correspondence to our prevailing scientific

theories about the origins of the universe and life on earth. We have no polemic struggles against ancient Mesopotamia. None of us live in the kind of pre-industrial agrarian society described in these stories. For us, the pain of childbirth is part of nature, not a curse from God. The kind of relationships legitimated by the story of Adam and Eve are based on gender assumptions that we no longer maintain. In our society, women are not considered inferior to men—though they are often treated that way. Women are certainly not considered the property of men.

So why read these stories?

Even though our world is vastly different from the world that produced these stories, the most meaningful myths are timeless because they are not bound to history or science. They are more evocative than descriptive. They are more about inspiration than information. They are meant to ignite our imaginations. They are meant to be heard and experienced. And these stories have certainly played a critical role in the shaping of western society.

In the first creation story of Genesis, we are told that the world is not random and chaotic. Rather, it is the creation of a God that put things in order and with a purpose. Humanity is created in God's own image to care for this world in partnership with God. Indeed, we become co-creators with God in the unfolding of the world. The image of God in each of us has the potential to shape everything about how we view ourselves and how we treat others.

In the second creation story, the nature of human community is given more attention. We are told that we are created to be helpers and partners for each other. Though our contemporary society is locked in heated debates about the nature of marriage that goes

beyond the norms envisioned in ancient Israel, more than anything this story speaks of the sacred nature of intimate relationships.

The story of the man and the woman in the garden has left a profound imprint in the fabric of western culture. Traditionally known as “the Fall”, this story speaks of how the first human beings disobey God and suffer consequences because of it. For some, it has been understood as the story of the origin of sin and evil in the world, the primordial transgression that infects all of humanity and binds our wills in total depravity. For others, it is a symbolic representation of the existential estrangement we all feel in this life—estrangement from God, estrangement from each other, estrangement even from our true selves.

In this sermon series on the Book of Genesis, we invite you first and foremost to listen with fresh ears to these ancient stories. At times they will sound foreign and strange. At times they will sound remarkably familiar.

Find *yourselves* in these stories. They were written by and for people very different than us, but we believe that they are inspired by encounters with the same God we gather here to worship. And, no matter what you believe or don't believe, no matter what your relationship is to Christianity, these stories have shaped something about who you are.

Join us on this journey into our past—a journey of discovering who we are; a journey of discovering who God calls us to be.

Amen.