

Genesis 1:24-2:4a
October 25, 2020

1) Genesis 1:24-25 – The 6th Day Begins

- a) “Then God said, let us make humankind...” – The creation of people is introduced in a more impressive way than any other act of creation. You can almost hear a drumroll preceding this main act of the creation show. God is more intimately involved here than elsewhere. The term for creation is used 3 times in verse 27 as if to say, in this one act the events of creation have reached their culmination. Not that the other results of divine creation are secondary and unimportant, but the priestly writers are focused on persons as the high point and goal of the creation events.

2) Genesis 1:26-27 – The Creation of Humankind

- a) “Let *us* make” – Why the use of the plural?
- i) Is this the royal “we,” as if it were the Queen of England or the Pope speaking? Probably not. This form of the plural pronoun is used rarely in the Old Testament; if it were meant as God speaking in a majestic way, it would be used more consistently elsewhere in Scripture.
 - ii) The Hebrew word for “God” is usually written in a plural form, but it normally takes a singular verb as it does in verse 26, “And God said.”
 - iii) Most commentators concur that the reference is to the heavenly council surrounding God or a reference to the hosts of heaven. What we have here is a remnant of the polytheistic stories emerging from Near Eastern cultures. There is, however, a clear difference from these earlier religious myths. The other heavenly beings may form a community of gods, but they are powerless here; they don’t even speak. Von Rad notices an advantage of the plural pronoun, “The extraordinary plural prevents one from referring God’s image too directly to God the Lord. God includes himself among the heavenly beings and thereby conceals himself in this multiplicity.” This is certainly not the priestly writers referring to the Trinity.

- b) “humankind” – The Hebrew term is “adam” and it is not meant here as a proper name but as a generic term for all humans. It is a collective term and both genders are included in its meaning. In the priestly account God makes adam, both male and female, in one act of creation.
- c) “In our image, according to our likeness” – The priestly author is attempting to show a kinship of humanity and the divine, yet the linkage cannot be so strong as to be an exact duplicate. The term “image” refers to a physical object like a statue. It was the practice in both Egypt and Babylonia for rulers to place images of themselves throughout their kingdom, but of course those images were dead and had no capacity to walk or talk. The God of Israel also created images, but they were a lot smarter than a piece of wood shaped in the image of a god. The priestly writers pictured humans as walking representations of God, persons of great importance and value.
- d) The Old Testament scholar, John Durham, interprets the terms “image and likeness” as Hebrew stairstep parallelism where the 2nd term more clearly defines the 1st. If the term “image” is understood as an exact duplicate, the term “likeness” quickly corrects that implication by saying, “well not exactly.” The writer is insisting there can be no exact image of God’s own self. In the final analysis, “image” can only be understood as a metaphor.
- e) One of the earliest Christian theologians was the 2nd century Bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus. In focusing on the words “image and likeness” Irenaeus argued that “image” referred to the immature character of persons when created and when we are born, needing to learn and grow up. The term also described the chaos that confronts us in the world of nature. Persons and the world are not yet all that they are meant to be. The 2nd term, “likeness,” referred to the future possibilities of each person and the world. In the wisdom of God, taught Irenaeus, we have been placed in the world, not as spectators, but as stewards charged by God to bring harmony, peace, health, and righteousness to a sometime chaotic world. As stewards of creation God has left something for us to do. God calls upon humankind to help finish God’s creation. We are called to serve as “co-creators” with God, to help God finish and bring to its full glory the marvelous creation in which we have been placed. We are called to join God in an “eighth day of creation.” What higher calling could there be than this, our 1st and most important job

assigned by God at the time of creation? We are called to be stewards of God caring with love, patience, and wisdom for the world around us.

- f) “and let them have dominion...” Sibley Towner insists that the term “and” appearing in the NRSV at the beginning of this phrase is best translated as a subordinating conjunction so that the sentence should read, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, *so that they may* have dominion over the fish of the sea’.” He concludes, “It means that God’s image in us is expressed or manifested in ‘dominion’.” God has given persons a power and task that affect all other living creatures. The term “dominion” used in verse 26 has been abused greatly in human history. The term is found in verse 28 in conjunction with the verb, “subdue.” Both terms need to be understood in keeping with the creation story where humans are made in God’s image. If that is so, then our dominion and subduing of the earth needs to be in keeping with God’s care and love. The raw use of power is inconsistent with God’s will for the created order. Dominion is best understood in terms of faithful stewardship.
- g) The model for godly dominion most often used in the Old Testament is that of a good shepherd who tenderly cares for the animals. All the biblical patriarchs were shepherds. Moses and David were both shepherds. Psalm 23 begins with the words, “The Lord is my shepherd.” The Christian understanding of dominion is interpreted in accordance with the life and death of Jesus Christ. In chapter 10 of the gospel of John, Jesus pictures himself as the good shepherd whose task is not to control or abuse, but to lay down his life for the sheep. In Jesus we see clearly that dominion means servanthood and sacrificial service. The biblical understanding of dominion is to see the task of humankind as always working for the well-being of God’s creation.

3) Genesis 1:28-31 – Blessing

- a) The history of divine blessing begins when life 1st emerges on this earth and it continues through biblical history and to each of our lives now. Blessing, like grace, is not something that is earned, but comes as part of God’s love and care for the world. It is important to note that the story of divine blessing begins in Genesis 1:28 with surprisingly – sex! In contrast with some

interpretations of Genesis 2, in this verse sexuality is blessed and is not pictured as a result of some fallen and sinful state. In a patriarchal culture it is interesting that the priestly writers recognize that the male is not created alone but finds meaning only in relation to the female. Human beings were created for relationships. Moreover, in repudiation of later Greek and Gnostic views of the feminine sex, sexuality is pictured as a blessed gift of the creator. Though that can be abused, sex is meant to be a blessing.

- b) Verse 31 contains the concluding formula of blessing for the entire work of creation: “Behold, it was very good.” It is a terse statement but dramatically important. It would not be incorrect to translate this phrase as saying it was “completely perfect,” referring to the harmony and beauty of the entire universe. The created order was exactly as God intended it to be.

4) Genesis 2:1-4a – The 7th day: Sabbath

- a) After 6 days of creation, God rested. This partially parallels the Babylonian creation story which speaks of 6 days of creation culminating in a seventh day of rest and a huge celebration involving a gathering of all the gods. The priestly writers emphasized a more solitary and religious sanctification of the day when God blessed and hallowed the day. This day was different than the others because it was meant to be a day of rest and remembrance of God’s blessing. Von Rad cautions that nothing is said in these verses concerning the institution of the Sabbath day. That is to come later. Exodus 16:29-30 states that Sabbath rules were instituted following the gift of manna in the wilderness.
- b) Remember the historical setting of the priestly material. It was written during the time of the Babylonian exile when the Jewish people were struggling to maintain their distinctive identity. The observance of a weekly Sabbath would have been 1 of the unique marks of Israelites. That unique feature of Jewish identity is rooted in the act of creation itself. Sabbath rest came to be considered as the glorious and harmonious condition of God’s creation when all things existed within God’s perfect will. And that is the goal of history, to re-create that 1st Sabbath day.

- c) The words of 2:4a are problematic. This phrase is used throughout Genesis as a formula announcing the ending or beginning of a division of the priestly documents. Presumably, these words were added by a later editor as the concluding words to this portion of the priestly story telling the events of creation.

Questions for Reflection:

Is it too much to claim that persons are called to be “co-creators” with God? Is it helpful to see the world as partially unfinished, giving persons something to do?

If we are called to be stewards of God’s creation, how do you think we have done? Is there something you and I can do to show in some concrete ways that we want to be better stewards of God’s creation?

The pronouncement of a divine blessing is an important part of the creation story. Do you feel in a deep and personal way that you have been blessed, not only by God but by other persons as well?

A Sabbath of rest and remembrance at one time played an important part in American culture, but not so much now. Are there ways we can recapture any of that sense of reverence for the Sabbath, or would that be impossible?