

Firm Foundations: This Is My Father's World

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 1: 1-26

Today we start a three-part sermon series based on Genesis 1-3. We call this series Firm Foundations. We chose that name because, during these stressful and uncertain times, we want to go back to foundational stories. These stories ground us. Genesis 1-3 is foundational in the sense that it tells the story of creation-the foundation of the world. But it is also foundational because this is the place where God begins to reveal the answers to the foundational questions of life. Questions like: Who is God? What is the nature of the created world? And what are human beings? I think you will agree those are foundational questions. How you answer those questions will have an enormous effect on how you live in the world. Today we will see what Genesis has to say about the natural world, next week we will look at what Genesis has to say about the nature of human beings, and two weeks from now, we will focus on what Genesis has to tell us about the character of our God. As we begin, let me say that these sermons owe a debt to the thinking of Andy Crouch, the author and theologian.

When you walk outside on a perfectly clear night and you look up at the stars, what do you see? A mother and her 6-year-old child are out in the backyard together on a beautiful night. They look up and above them, the night sky is resplendent with stars. "Mommy," asks the child, "What are all those stars? Where did they come from?" How mom answers that question depends on what she believes. How mom answers that question will shape that child.

If the mother and child were Babylonians living 600 years before Jesus, about the time Genesis 1 took the form in which we have it now, the mother would have said: "Well my darling the sky is part of the body of Tiamat, the great sea monster." Then that mother would have proceeded to tell her child the story of Marduk and his battle with Tiamat the dragon goddess of the sea: "My child, Tiamat was a cruel and terrible goddess. She was the most powerful of all the gods! She made life miserable for all the other gods-in fact she threatened to kill them all. So one day, Marduk, son of one of the gods, decided that he would fight Tiamat. He met Tiamat in battle. Everyone thought Tiamat would destroy him. But when Tiamat opened her huge dragon mouth to swallow him, Marduk the mighty shot a powerful arrow right into her mouth. Tiamat fell dead! Victorious Marduk then took Tiamat's body and cuts it in two pieces. With the top half of her body he made the sky, and with the bottom half of her body he made the earth. So, the sky above us and the ground below us are the body of a great sea monster."

"And what about the stars mommy, what are they made of?" "Well my darling those stars are the drops of blood that oozed out of Tiamat after she died." That is approximately what a Babylonian mother would tell her child about creation. You can find the full story in the Enuma Elish, the great creation myth of the Babylonian people.

What would this story teach that little boy? How would he see the world? He would see the natural world as the product of a violent conflict; violent conflict between selfish gods who were always at each other's throats. He would look at the stars and think blood. He would look at the ground and think of violence. He would look at the sky and think of death. How would that shape him? Well, lacking any psychological data on the attitudes of Babylonian children, I think we can guess that this little boy would go through life with his fists up and his senses on high alert. The world is dangerous. It is won by force, so be ready to fight!

That is what a Babylonian child would hear. What would a modern child hear? If a father and a daughter of a completely non-religious family went out on a starry night, and the daughter asked what the stars were all about, what kind of an answer would she get? Maybe the answer Jennifer Percy got from her father. Jennifer Percy is a writer and professor. She teaches writing at New York University. Jennifer's father was not a believer. He was a scientist. Those things are not opposed to each other. I think science and faith go together just fine. But Jennifer's father wasn't just a scientist, he was a scientific materialist. In other words, he didn't believe in God, he didn't believe in transcendence; he thought the world was just material stuff and material processes. So here's how Jennifer describes her Father's answer.

"My Father was an amateur physicist and saw the world through only that lens. I remember him saying that we are all formed of stardust, that the atoms in our bodies began in stars millions of years ago. Or how, if we stepped into a black hole, we'd be turned into a stream of subatomic particles." Jennifer's family lived in rural Oregon, between the mountains and the desert. On weekends, they'd go out to deserted places and look up at the night sky through a telescope. She and her father would look at the great arc of the stars, only he wouldn't call them stars. Instead he'd call them 'dying suns.' If little Jennifer were baking and accidentally burnt a gingerbread man, and went to her dad crying, her dad would say, "Well dear, one day the sun's going to destroy the earth. Then we'll all be like the gingerbread man." Jennifer Percy's dad didn't tell his daughter a myth like the Babylonian Mother, but it amounts to the same thing.

How do you think that made little Jennifer feel? Well, she tells us. "This brand of science terrified me. I found the brutal immensity of the universe frightening. My brother and I, like many kids, were shaped by poking through the books we had at home, and we had just two kinds: physics books and Stephen King books. Both were terrifying. So we had to choose what kind of fear we liked best."

Now let me be clear: science is a good thing! Pursuit of science is something Christians should embrace. I have a high level of confidence in the findings of Biology and Physics and Chemistry. Science is really good at figuring out how things work, the physical properties and the physical processes of things. But when science tries to talk about the meaning of things, the 'why' of existence, when science starts to talk as if physical processes explain everything, then science does less well. That is the difference between science—a wonderful discipline—and scientific materialism—a kind of secular faith. Jennifer Percy's dad wasn't just talking about what a star was, he was telling a story about meaning. His story was: there is no meaning. There is no purpose. There is no hope, no transcendence. "My darling daughter, we are all doomed to extinction under a sky full of dying suns. Would you like another cookie?"

Now we come to the Bible. What does God tell us about the natural world in His word? What do we see, and what story do we tell our children when we walk out under a sky full of stars? Psalm 8, right? "Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I consider your heavens; the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place. What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" And that Psalm of praise is rooted in the words of our passage. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. God said, let there be light and there was light! God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day' and the darkness He called 'night.' And there was an evening and there was a morning—the first day."

Don't those two texts sound like music, like light and life, compared to the other two stories? And they tell the truth about our world. We do not live in the body of a slain dragon. This creation did not come to be through violent struggle. We do not live in a heartless world,

under a sky full of dying suns. We live in a world lovingly created by the hands of a God who knows our name, who cares for this creation and guides it to its purpose. The abundant life of this world isn't a lucky accident, it's the product of a God who made it with loving intention. He made it for a purpose. He made it in such a way that when you study this world, every plant, every stream, every creeping thing, every flying bird proclaims the glory of God. He made it in such a way that when He finished His work, He joyfully proclaimed, "It is good! It is good! It is good!"

I believe that deep in our hearts, we know this story is true. When we human beings see the beauty of a sunset, when we feel excited by the sudden appearance of spring flowers, when we finally get a warm day and we feel the sun on our face, something leaps inside us. When we see these beautiful things, isn't there something in our own heart that says, "It is good! It is good! It is good!?" That's like the voice of God at creation echoing inside us. We know in our hearts that this is our Father's world.

I think we've all noticed that since this Covid thing started, we've spent a lot more time outdoors. I don't know about your neighborhood, but my neighborhood is full of walkers. Especially on the sunny days, the area parks and trails are full of folks taking walks, enjoying the beauty of Michigan at an appropriate social distance. Last week Saturday my family went to Saugatuck State Park and walked the dunes. It was glorious. Why are we going outside so much? Part of the reason we walk is because we are getting stir crazy and want to get out.

But based on what I've been hearing from you, and based on what I've seen on social media, these walks are also a source of comfort and re-assurance. As we watch creation slowly move from winter into spring, it reminds us that our Lord is still running this world. Our Lord is still working His purposes out. When we see a daffodil force its way up through the brown dead leaves, it's like a message. That daffodil is declaring the faithfulness of God. God is still in control. God is still moving His world from winter into spring. This whole Covid thing may be making us nervous, but the God who makes the daffodils bloom every year, will get us through the winter of this virus and bring us back together again. It's like we can hear the creation saying to us, 'This is our Father's world, and though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.'

When Genesis 1 teaches us the truth of our world, the truth of creation, there are three appropriate human responses: First, we're called to care for creation and steward it well. This world is the work of His fingers, it's His treasured construction and He wants us to take care of it. Just as Adam and Eve were called to care for and cultivate the garden, so we are called to care for and cultivate our world. Creation care is a biblical thing.

Second, we magnify God's work. When an artist responds to the beauty of the world by creating a work of art, a song, a poem, a painting, He magnifies God's glory. When a scientist studies the intricacies of creation and she discovers some amazing physical property of the universe, she magnifies God, gives Him glory. When a 6-year-old child sees a sunset and says "Wow! Thanks God!" That child glorifies God.

Finally, we are called to trust. The God who makes the sun rise and set every morning, the God who faithfully brings the seasons turning winter into spring, the God who so loves this world that He sent His only son to die for it, that good God will most certainly bring us through our troubles and fears to be with Him in the new creation. Don't be afraid people! The Lord is king. Let the heavens ring. God reigns. Let the earth be glad.

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