

Firm Foundations: Made in God's Image

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

Genesis 1:26-31

Last week we started a new sermon series based on Genesis 1-3. We called the series Firm Foundations, because during these stressful and uncertain times, we want to put our feet on solid Biblical foundations. Genesis 1-3 addresses foundational questions of faith, foundational questions of existence. Questions like, 'Who is God? What are human beings? And what is the nature of the physical world?' Last week we looked at the last of those questions. We saw that the Bible teaches us that the natural world is our Father's world. It is the theater of God's glory. This week we will look at another foundational question. This week we will listen to what the Bible has to teach us about the question: *What are human beings? Where did we come from and what are we for?* To begin our reflection, let's read Genesis 1:26-31.

Last week when we talked about the Bible's teaching about the natural world, you might remember that I referenced Babylonians creation myths. I talked about how the Babylonians believed creation was made from the body of a sea monster, Tiamat, the goddess of the sea. I did that because if you really want to understand Genesis 1, if you really want to hear the Bible's creation story speak in its full depth, if you really want a deep understanding what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in these chapters you've got to know the creation stories of the nations around Israel. Of course, it is possible to learn from Genesis 1-3 without knowing these myths. You don't need to know about Tiamat and Marduk for the Holy Spirit to teach you through Genesis 1. But if you want to go deep, if you want to grow beyond a basic understanding, knowing these myths becomes important. Because it's pretty clear that, in the form we have them today, Genesis 1-3 were written against these other myths.

The creation story is an ancient story. But so are the Babylonian stories. The Babylonian stories existed before the time of Moses. When Genesis was written down and put in the form we have it today, these other myths, these other stories, were well-known. So, in the form we have it today Genesis 1 was written as a kind of stiff-arm to those other stories. Genesis 1 was written in conscious opposition to those stories. Genesis 1 was written to say, our God is not like the gods of the Babylonians and the Assyrians! That would have been important during times like the Babylonian exile. While they were in exile every Jewish child would have been bombarded with the Babylonian worldview. All they had to do was look up and see the temple of Marduk rising high above the city and they would be reminded of the Babylonian religion and its claims about the world. Little Jewish children would have heard the Babylonian stories on the streets of the city in the marketplace, from other Babylonian children. You can imagine a child coming home late at night and saying, "*Daddy, my friend said Marduk created the world in a fight with a sea monster.*" Then father would take the child on his knee and say, "No my son, let me tell you the true story. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..." This story would have taken shape against the stories of Babylon and Assyria and their gods.

You can actually see that against-ness in the text. For example, two of the great gods of the Babylonian pantheon were Shamash, the god of the sun and Nanna, the god of the moon. The Hebrew word for sun sounds a little like Shamash's name. The Hebrew word for sun is Shemesh. Shemesh and Shamash. But when Genesis 1 tells about how God created the sun and the moon, notice the wording? God creates a 'greater light' and a 'lesser light.' Hebrew has perfectly good

words for sun and moon. Why doesn't the text use them? The text doesn't want to have any association with the gods of Babylon. The story doesn't want you to think even for one second that the sun has any godlike power. The sun, the moon, and the stars are all completely under God's control. The text pushes against Babylonian religion. But if you don't know the stories, you can't feel the push.

In the same way, when we hear the Bible talk about the creation of human beings, we get a better sense of the Bible's message when we know the Assyrian and the Babylonian stories about where human beings came from and what they were made for. So, what's the Babylonian story of human origins? In the Babylonian story, people are created out of the blood of a slain god. Marduk slays Kingu, one of one of his rival gods. He mixes Kingu's blood with clay, and out of that he forms human beings. Why did Marduk create these human beings? What was their purpose? They were created to be the lackeys of the gods, the slaves of the gods. In the Assyrian myths, the gods were tired of getting their own food, so they create human beings to get food for them so they can live lives of leisure. Andy Crouch likes to say that human beings were made to barbeque for the gods. The altars were like barbeques. Human beings grilled on the altars. They burned bulls and calves and sheep and goats so the gods wouldn't get hungry. They poured out the libations of blood so the gods wouldn't get thirsty. Human beings toiled away at the heavenly barbeque so that the gods would be fat and happy instead of hangry and mean. *So human beings are creatures born out of violence and they are created for a life of meaningless toil.*

"So what!" you may say. "That was Babylon. No one believes that today. No one thinks we are created to barbeque meat for the gods!" True. But there are lots of people who have, more or less, a Babylonian view of life. They feel like life is meaningless toil. They may not think they are barbequing for the gods, but *they feel as though every day the powers of the world are asking them for food.* There are lots of people who feel as though, every day the world is saying, "Feed me! Prove yourself! Show me what you got! Show me that you're worth my attention!" Is that so different from a bunch of gods asking to be fed. Genesis 1 tells a totally different story about who we are. We are not made to give food to God, in fact Genesis 1 makes a point of saying God is the one who gives food to us. Abundant food. Good food of astonishing taste and variety. We don't feed God; He feeds us. We are not created to be God's slaves. We are created to be His helpers! His representatives on earth. We aren't cringing slaves, we're joyful servants. *"Here's my world people. Enjoy it! Be fruitful and multiply. Fill my creation. Build new things. Be creative. Use your imagination. Take care of my garden but don't just take care of it, make it more and more fruitful and beautiful."* And finally, we are not made from the blood of a slain god, we are made in God's image! We are not children of violence; we are children of love. In fact, we are the crown of His creation. We are the last thing He creates, and when He makes us He doesn't just say, "It is good." He gets a little more excited and he says, "It is VERY good." He delights in us.

There's a lot to say about what it means to be made in God's image, and I'm not going to say all those things here, but one of the things implied is that God has special affection for us. Because He made us in His image, our heavenly Father sees Himself in us...like a parent sees a little of themselves in a child.

Of all His creatures, only people have the power to grieve God. It's a measure of His love for us that of all the things He has created, only human beings have the power to make Him angry. Because no one can disappoint you or hurt you like your own children. You get the sense of the connection between God and His image bearers in Matthew 25. There Jesus identifies so

deeply with people that when a poor person neglected, or when a hungry person isn't fed, or when a lonely person is not welcomed, it's as if those things were happening to Him. Think about that. When you are lonely, or left out, or frightened, or perplexed, Jesus is so close to you that it's as if it's happening to Him.

How deep does that identification go? It goes all the way to the cross. Jesus takes all our sin and guilt, Jesus takes all our pain and fear and He dies for us, so that we can have life and hope. In the Babylonian story the gods demand meat from their puny human slaves. In our story God Himself dies for us and gives His body as heavenly food for His beloved children. It's a totally different view of what a human is. When you live in the way of Babylon, the universe shouts at you in the imperative. When you live in the way of Babylon, you walk out the door and you hear the universe demands: "Feed me! Show me what you got!" When you belong to God the Father, when you are in Christ, you walk out the door in the morning and God says to you "You are my beloved child! Don't be afraid! I am with you! You matter! Go out and do something creative and wonderful today!" One is the voice of fear, the other is the voice of grace. Which voice do you hear in the morning?

These different versions of human origins lead to different views of human excellence, different views of human greatness. The Babylonian/Assyrian view of human greatness shows up in the Epic of Gilgamesh. It's one of the stories told to Babylonian children. The epic portrays Gilgamesh as the paragon of greatness. He is celebrated as the greatest ruler ever. What makes him great? He is the strongest. He is the most ruthless. He is the smartest and the sexiest and therefore he is the best. Here's a quote from the epic describing his greatness: "*[Gilgamesh is] as strong as a savage bull, none can withstand his arms. No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all...His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior's daughter nor the wife of the noble.*" He kills any male challenger and seduces any woman he chooses. The epic concludes by saying. "*of mankind, all that are known, none will leave a monument for generations to come to compare with his.*" You can hear the message: Gilgamesh is the strongest, the smartest, and the sexiest, and therefore the greatest. That's Babylonian manhood.

Do elements of that view of greatness still linger today? Yes they do. I love sports and in my hunger for competitive sports I've been watching ESPN's 10 part special on Michael Jordan-The Last Dance. When it comes to the sports world, Michael Jordan is called great. He's revered as the GOAT-greatest of all time. The series celebrates his greatness, and it also gives us a pretty good idea about the source of that greatness. It's his ruthless competitive nature. It's his iron will to win no matter what. Michael Jordan's life is one long game of king of the hill. He wants to dominate. It made him a *ferocious gambler*. He would bet tens of thousands of dollars on things like rock paper scissors. It made him a *vicious trash talker*. He would humiliate opponents. During practice, he would even belittle his own teammates to prove his dominance. And, he *never let go of a grudge*. Hear him talk and it's clear that he still has a visceral dislike of anyone who has disrespected him. He still hates the Bad Boy Detroit Pistons. Michael's creed: take no prisoners, show no mercy, never apologize. And while I admire his basketball ability, and while I'm impressed with his basketball achievements, I would call his greatness a kind of Gilgamesh greatness, and I would call any celebration of his greatness a celebration of Gilgamesh greatness.

If the Babylonians pointed to Gilgamesh as the picture of human greatness, we hold up Jesus. Any difference between those two people? Any difference between the greatness they represent? Gilgamesh showed his greatness by standing on the chest of every man who dared challenge him. "*No son is left with his father for Gilgamesh takes them all!*" What about Jesus? How does He show His greatness? How about this picture from John 13. "*Jesus knew that the*

Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and he was returning to God.” Wow. All things under His power! True majesty! What did He do with that power? Knowing that God had put all things under his power, *“Jesus got up from his meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel under his waist. After that he poured water in a basin and began to wash his disciple’s feet.”* Behold the greatest man who ever lived, washing the feet of his disciples. Behold the most powerful man to ever walk this earth, the one in whom all glory resides, allowing people full of anger and despair to spit in His face. Behold Lord of eternity, dying on the cross in shame for the salvation of the people He made.

Friends, don’t let your fears lie to you. You are not miserable creatures doomed to a life of toil. In Christ, you are beloved children of God. You are God’s handiwork, His workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good and meaningful work which God prepared in advance for you to do! His love made you, His love saved you, His love will finish the good work it started in you, and His love will bring you home.

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