

## WHICH CAME FIRST?

A Sermon by Adam Pachter

Which came first, the Word or the World? As spring begins to bear witness around us, I find myself comparing creations, or at least the stories of creation. “In the beginning,” Genesis tells us, “God created the heaven and the earth.” In these initial moments, “the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” So how does God dispel the darkness? God says, “Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good.”

But there’s another creation story worth considering, and this one comes from John. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In this telling, we start not with Worlds, but with Words. “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” Jesus is the Word, this Word made flesh.

And I find this passage, this image, as with much from John’s Gospel, both infinitely intriguing and maddeningly mysterious. John loves language, a trait that I greatly respect, but how exactly does a Word become flesh? How does that work?

On a certain level, as a parent, I have seen a word become flesh – not once, but twice. For every child is an act of creation, and though the names Debbie and I gave them were Lucy and Maya, the word that created them was Love.

But today I’d like to consider another way in which words become flesh – a way personal to my profession, As most of you know, I’m a screenwriter, and my first film, a thriller called Black Bags, will be released in just about a week. And I’ve been fortunate enough to participate in this act of creation from the very first word on the page in 2015, to seeing those words spoken by actors in Guthrie, Oklahoma, when we filmed in May 2021, to later this month when I will see those words comes to life in the theater at our first film festival.

In Hollywood, a place not known for subtlety, we call the process “world-building.” In every script’s beginning, there is nothing but the blank page, a place also “without form, and void,” to use Genesis’ wonderful words. And my job is to play God, to populate this void with words that become characters who are brought to life by actors and are eventually enjoyed by audiences. It’s a fairly daunting task. But there are certain principles that guide us.

The first is that when you’re world-building, whether it’s vampires or velociraptors, the audience will generally accept whatever rules you establish, as long as you stick to them. I’m going to my first Red Sox game of the year this afternoon, to witness the slightly chilly creation of a new season, and woe unto anyone who, after I arrive, suddenly decrees that today’s game will only be 7 innings long. Now, to keep with the metaphor, I’m not saying an audience doesn’t appreciate the occasional curve ball – we call them reveals or reversals in Hollywood. And both movies and TV shows thrive on irony. But even when something unexpected occurs, it shouldn’t violate the basic rules that govern the world you’ve built. In Star Wars, the Force is the Force, even if we’re sometimes surprised by who is able to harness it.

So now let’s return to the first chapter of Genesis, to God the great world-builder, and see what we can learn. What is the one key rule of God’s creation, that word which keeps recurring from the very first verse? That word is “good.” Verse 4 – “and God say the light, that it was good.” Verse 10 – “And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas; and God saw that it was good.” Verse 12 – the grass, the herb yielding seed, and the tree yielding fruit – all good. Verse 16-18, the Sun and the Moon, both good. Verse 21 – “every living creature that moveth” -- Verse 25 “every thing that creepeth upon the earth” -- good. And verse 31 – here’s the kicker: “And God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”

I am not saying this is a world without sin and sorrow – we’ve all seen plenty of both. There’s light and dark, birth and death, highs and lows. But God’s one basic rule of creation has never been broken – the World is good. And why is it good – because God made it with love.

And how do we know that? Because the Gospel of John tells us so, in one of its most pivotal passages: Chapter 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Here it is, the great reveal of the greatest story ever told – with Jesus, God adds the Word to the World, the Word made flesh to save us. There’s plenty of irony in the seasons of Christ – born in the darkest month, dying just as spring’s renewal abounds. But the important point is that Jesus never violates God’s law of love; both his life and death remain the ultimate expression of that love. And that is why, every day and in every way, I’m in awe of God’s creation.

But there’s one more thing I’d like to say. Both the Word and the World are acts of brute creation. Vital, primal, elemental. Creation dispels both absolute dark, and absolute light. The word breaks through the blank page just as morning breaks through the blank night. Both pierce the void, and that’s scary. We don’t always know where creation will take us, or if we might lose control of that which we’ve created, a feeling to which both poets and parents can relate. Sending a script out into the world, sending a child off to college – I’ve done both in this past year, and both were at times terrifying to me.

Sometimes it may feel easier just to drift in the void of sleep, or stealth, or silence. Stay still, stay safe. Abandon the page to its blankness. Maybe it would have been easier for God to remain poised there in the dark, infinitely pre-creation. But then the dark would have won, then the word would never have been made flesh. Then God would have stayed alone.

Creation is a compulsion, a companion – and though it is scary, though both the seed and the seasons don’t just rise and grow, but also wither and fall, it is also necessary. “Necesscary,” one might say if I were to coin a word today. And I think Maya Angelou knew something of that when she said the greatest agony is an untold story. Think of existence without Genesis or Jesus. Where does that leave the world? Where does that leave us? A life without creation is a life without faith, hope, and love.

And so I close by issuing a call for your own creations. Sometime later today, I challenge you to create something. Plant a seed, invent a dance, connect with an old friend. Cuddle a child, craft a card, start a story – but in all you do, keep to God’s one unending rule: whatever you create, make it with love. And when you do, I promise that, like God, you will look upon your creation and know that it is Good. Amen.