

Maker of Heaven and Earth

Genesis 1:1-5

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Christine, a precocious nine year-old, stopped all conversation with her question to me during the appetizers before dinner. The extended family was gathered around a coffee table filled with cheese, crackers, shrimp, dips and veggies, and the room was filled with the hum of conversation when Christine asked me; “Why did God create cancer?” Like the child who blurts out, “The king has no clothes!” Christine drew our attention to the imposing elephant in the room right next to where Grandma was seated. Grandma had cancer and was dying. It was like one of those old EF Hutton commercials. The chatter immediately hushed and everyone leaned in waiting for the minister’s response. Not often do I get that kind of attention! Questions about God and the meaning of life, and especially about how to understand tragedy or problems of good and evil, well . . . people hope the minister has something to say. I finished chewing and placed my glass on the table. As I began to gather my thoughts, trying to translate them into the language and cognitive framework of a fourth grader, Christine’s aunt blurted out her own response. She said, “I believe that when God gave our son Robbie diabetes, it was because he is strong enough to handle it and God wants to use him to help other people.” Robbie was sitting right there next to her on the sofa. I couldn’t help but wonder how Robbie was feeling at that moment. How should I respond? What would you say?

We all experience the world as a mixture of good and bad, blessings and problems. Like the Psalmist we too can proclaim “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”¹ Why did God create this kind of a world? Christine is not the first to ask such questions. The first chapters of Genesis reflect on the meaning and significance of all life. When we affirm our faith, as we often do in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, we begin with the words, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” Does our belief in God as creator help Christine with her question?

As a new year begins, it seems fitting that we should also go back to the beginning, to the first book of the Bible: Genesis. We begin best by laying the foundations rightly for the life of faith, the cornerstone being Jesus Christ himself.

1 Psalm 8

John Calvin was a second-generation reformer with a substantial impact on subsequent generations of thinkers. For Calvin, knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves is inseparable. One cannot know one without the other. God the creator and God the redeemer are also inseparable. God reveals himself both outwardly and inwardly, both in the creation but more importantly within the life of the believer. There is no way to know God the creator apart from faith. We do not come to know God through general revelation in nature but through the inward revelation as God our Redeemer.

In some ways it would make more sense to start the Bible with the book of Exodus, because that is where the children of God came to know God first, as the one who saves them from slavery. It is only after knowing God the redeemer that they come to understand that this God is also the creator of all that is.

Both the Bible and the Apostle's Creed really start in the wrong place. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth" and the book of Genesis starts with God the creator. But it is God the redeemer that brings the creator into focus and we come to know that the one responsible for all of this, is personally interested in my life and your life, in our salvation, and redemption, and regeneration. So Christmas and the incarnation, where God "accommodates" himself for us so that we might know him, is vitally important to know. But God the redeemer is also God the creator, who merely spoke then all of life came into existence. This God brought order into the chaos of life. What chaos in your life needs reordering this year?

Genesis tells us something we will not learn anywhere else:

1. that God, the father of Jesus Christ, is the ultimate source and ground of everything in the observable universe;
2. therefore the world and our life in it are good (despite sometimes tragic experiences); and
3. that we need fear nothing in the world but neither can we give ultimate loyalty to anything in the world. God alone is deserving of our ultimate loyalty.

When we affirm that God is the, “maker of heaven and earth” as we do in the Apostle’s Creed, we don’t mean to say that God just got it all started and then retired from the scene. That is known as “deism,” a position held incidentally by several of our American ancestors at the time of the Revolution. It wasn’t just back then that God created -- God is creating and recreating all the time . . . God is not an absentee landlord. The world is an open place, not deterministic. We can act and change outcomes in the world.

God also acts in the world of his making. Unpredictable? Absolutely! God calls the world into existence and then calls people to be his faithful representatives in that world. The story of Genesis is about the gifts given, and the demands announced with those gifts, and the various responses evoked by God’s two calls: the call to live in the world as God would have us live, and the call to live in the community of the faithful – the Church.²

A second affirmation in the creation story is that God created out of nothing. When we create things, we have to rely upon that which already exists. A furniture maker can create a fine table but needs wood to do so. An artist can manipulate paint on canvas, or stone, or marble, or even notes and tones to create something of value but the elements are already in existence. When the Bible says, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep,” it claims that God created from nothing. Creation from nothing is completely beyond our experience. The only explanation the Bible offers is that it happened by the sheer expression of God’s will by speaking a word, “Let there be light” and there was light. He spoke and it came into reality.

That’s important because it prevents a kind of dualism that we often see in modern culture. If you’ve watched *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* or the *World Wrestling Federation*, you see this eternal struggle between the forces of good and evil. In dualism, there are two equal forces in the universe, locked in cosmic battle for supremacy. While it makes for good movies it is bad theology. The ancient world often viewed creation this way but the Jewish/Christian perspective was a critique of that commonly held perspective. There are not two fundamental, eternal principles of reality, good and evil, light and darkness,

2 Brueggemann, Walter. “Genesis” *The Interpretation Commentary* (Atlanta, John Knox Press 1982 p.1

the spiritual and the physical, the soul and the body, that are at war with each other — God is the Creator of all. Everything -- which is to say that there is no reality apart from God. Even those forces that oppose God are not rival gods but find their source in the one God. Therefore, those powers cannot ultimately defeat God's purposes. The physical, the material world, our bodies and nature are not God's enemies or inferior realities. God created them! And they are good! When we affirm that God created the heavens and the earth, we affirm that the material and physical world matters! We affirm that this is the world of God's creative activity and even those forces that oppose God cannot thwart the will of God.

So let's return to the family dinner and to the aunt's statement that, "Diabetes was given by God to my son because he is strong enough and God wants to use him to help others." I responded, "I can agree with half of that statement." God doesn't go around inflicting people with disease to see if they can handle it, or running cars off the road, or sending stray bullets into children because God wants them in heaven. Not everything that happens in the world is what God intends. God has created everything but there is much in the world that opposes God's will and breaks God's heart. So God did not "give" Robbie diabetes, but the Lord does want and can use even that which is not good — illness and tragedy — to accomplish his will in us and in others, and in the world.

Christians maintain the world is good, not because everything we experience is good. It is true that we may rebel against God, misuse creation, making ourselves and others miserable by how we live and treat one another. There are disasters of all kinds, but that never means the creation is bad. There is evil but it is an intruder into God's good creation, a parasite, a cancer. It is good gone awry!

We can be optimistic and hopeful -- not because we look through rose-colored glasses, or minimize what is wrong in the world, or believe in the progress of humanity, or the inevitable progress of civilization. We can be optimistic because God said "yes" to the world! And God still says yes! The one who created it all and entered into the world in Jesus Christ, has willed the world into existence and the forces against life cannot ultimately spoil the loving and life-giving intentions of the Creator. God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is God the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all that is! And as it says

in the New Testament, “If God is for us, who can be against us? The God who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?”³ God the creator has, in Christ the redeemer, restored the image of himself in us.

Christine asked an important question, which drives right to the foundation of how we, as people of faith, understand the world of our experience. It was the kind of question that led our ancestors of faith to proclaim their belief in “God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” All of life is created by God – and it is good.

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, let there be light, and there was light – and God saw that the light was good. . . The first day.” Amen

3 Romans 8:31-32