Creation I

The Rev. Dr.
Peter G. James

Today, we start nine months worth of sermons on God’s Big Story. We’ll attempt, from September to June, to overview the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible is a big, sprawling narrative, written by hundreds of authors over thousands of years. If you’ve never read the Bible and don’t know where to start, if you’re confused by this seeming hodgepodge of Biblical stories, this sermon series is designed expressly for you.

I suggest you bring your Bibles to worship for the next nine months. I know there are Bibles in the pews, but do the math; we don’t have enough to go around. You’ll get more out of this big story if you follow along in your Bibles. This is especially true for visual learners. If you don’t own a Bible, stop by our bookstore.

I would also recommend bringing a notebook to worship. By tonight, you will forget most everything I will say this morning. By writing down the salient points, it will help you track with God’s Big Story.

We start today at the beginning with Genesis. Genesis is a word meaning beginning. Genesis opens with the words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis doesn’t specify where God originates.

Genesis simply presumes God’s existence.

The Bible is a story told at three levels. At its most basic level, the Bible is a story about people. There are hundreds of stories about people in this book; people who love God as well as people who dismiss God. At its intermediate level, the Bible is a story about the people of God. Later this fall, we will trace the lineage of a single couple into the people of God, identified as Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. At its highest level, the Bible is a story about God.

Some people are quick to jettison Genesis today, given the prominence of evolution. The Bible is not a science book. If the purpose of Genesis was to tell us how God made the world, the Bible would have been written in a far more exhaustive manner. The central question Genesis answers is not scientific: how God made the world.

Science has made enormous strides in our day, but it cannot answer the fundamental question of life’s origin—how something originates from nothing. No one has been able to produce something out of nothing in a test tube.

The famous preacher Dr. Henry Ward Beecher was entertaining a distinguished atheist, Colonel Robert Ingersoll, in his home.
Many Christians have the mistaken notion God decided to send Jesus after His original Old Testament plan failed.

These two men shared a common appreciation of astronomy. Dr. Beecher had in his home a magnificent working model of the earth, sun and planets. After examining it closely, the Colonel inquired who had made it. The preacher, Dr. Beecher, couldn’t resist. “Who made it?” Beecher replied in simulated astonishment. “Why nobody made it. It just happened.”

Genesis asserts this universe didn’t just happen. God created it.

Genesis unfolds the drama of creation as a series of seven days. Each day builds progressively to the next, with the climax coming in the sixth day. These days are not necessarily 24 hours, since the word “day” in Hebrew can refer either to a 24-hour period or a longer epic of time.

We read in Genesis that God worked six days and rested on the seventh day (2:2-3). The tempo of creation, consisting of six days of work and one day of rest, survives to this day as our basic unit of time. We’ll come back to this seventh day later in our Big Story when we explore Sabbath, a practice altogether lost in the frenetic place of our 21st century world.

This leaves six days. As introduction to these six days, we read in verse 2, “The earth was a formless void; darkness covered the face of the deep.” It’s worth noting the earth exists before God outfits it for human habitation. What God does in these first three days is provide form to what is previously formless. In day one, God forms light (1:3-5). In day two, God forms sky (1:6-8). In day three, God forms dry land and vegetation (1:11-13).

In days four to six, God fills this earthly form with substance. On day four, God fills the sky with two bodies of light; the sun to rule the day and the moon to light the night (1:14-19). On day five, God fills the firmament with air and sea creatures (1:20-23). On day six, God fills the earth with animals and people (1:24-31).

On this decisive sixth day, God says, “Let us make humanity in our image” (1:26). The previous days are each punctuated with the words “let there be” (1:3, 6) or simply “let” (1:9, 14, 20, 24). But on the sixth day, God is most intimately involved with His creation. The plural “us” can refer either to the whole company of heavenly hosts or the Trinity. The third member of the Trinity is identified in verse 2 as the wind or, alternatively, Spirit, that hovers over the face of the waters. The Trinity’s second member is not identified by name in Genesis, although John asserts in his gospel that Jesus Christ existed with God in creation from the very beginning. He writes, “All things came into being through him [Jesus] and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3). Many Christians have the mistaken notion God decided to send Jesus after His original Old Testament plan failed; as though Jesus constitutes plan B. No way! It has always been in the mind of God to send Jesus.

An image represents a duplicate or likeness of someone. When I look in the mirror, I see my image and likeness. The Bible says we are
created in God’s image and likeness. We are created with a soul, the spiritual capacity to know and experience God.

Kings were the only personages in antiquity created in the image of God. The Greeks would never conceive of peasants, women and children as created in God’s image. God’s image was confined to a certain class or position in society. Not so in Scripture! God created us, male and female, in the image of God.

We have reached that point in the sermon where it’s appropriate for you to ask, so what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I can identify at least three takeaways from today’s sermon.

First, your creation comes to you as a sheer gift. Don’t get wrapped around the axle of whether God fashioned you ex nihilo or used the evolutionary process. However God did it, God did it. Each day originates as God’s gift. You can never earn the right to live in God’s world. Your life comes to you as pure gift.

Second, your creation comes to you with a mandate. Genesis calls us to exercise “dominion over the earth” (1:27). You are stewards of God’s creation. If you think the debate over the environment is strictly political, read the first chapter of Genesis.

Third, your creation comes to you as the image of God. Your value is not measured by appearance or net worth; your life has dignity and value in relationship to God. Your worth is bestowed on you by a loving God.

When our kids entered college, Chris and I became acutely aware of the pressure young women face concerning self-image. Coeds face exacting standards related to body image, turning campuses into incubators for eating disorders. Courtney Martin writes in *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters* that today’s young women think they have to be everything. They must achieve top grades for access into their chosen career as well as develop the perfect body.

Let me return to the question David Benner asks in his book *Surrender to Love*. “What do you assume God feels when you come to mind?” When I ask people to do this, a surprising number of people say that the first thing they assume God feels is disappointment. Others assume God feels anger. In both cases, these people are convinced that it is their sins that first catches God’s attention. I think they are wrong—and I think the consequences of such a view of God are enormous. Benner says the first thing God feels toward you is love. God is madly in love with you.

I am holding a $20 bill. If I offered it to you, you’d surely take it. If I wadded it up in a ball and threw it on the ground, would you want it? If I stepped on it and kicked it, would you still want it? Of course you would. This $20 bill has value, not because of how it looks or where it’s been or what it’s been used for. A crisp, clean $20 bill is worth the same as a soiled, crumpled
There are people...who bear the image of the one who created them, but remain oblivious to it.

Jim Fassel is an NFL announcer and former head coach for the New York Giants. His team played in the Super Bowl some years ago. Jim and his wife, Kitty, have been haunted by a memory. In 1967, as college freshmen in Fullerton, California, they met and fell in love. When they discovered Kitty was pregnant, they decided to give their baby up for adoption. They married two years later and raised four more children. Yet, throughout their 32 years of marriage, they thought often about their first-born son. They tried to make contact with him but were unsuccessful. When Colorado adoption laws changed, they made contact with their son John and talked to him initially on Mother’s Day. Two days later, they met John, wife Kristi and their four children face-to-face. Initially, John and Jim couldn’t stop staring at each other. Their resemblance was altogether striking. For years, John Mathieson bore the image of his father but was unaware of it.

There are people like John who bear the image of the one who created them but remain oblivious to it. There are people convinced the earth is here by accident, although the evidence—the sun in optimal distance from the earth and the earth’s precise 23.44 degree tilt—argues to the contrary.

God has created people with the capacity to know and experience God. God isn’t merely force or mass or energy. God isn’t an unmoved mover. God isn’t a cosmic watchmaker who winds the earth and leaves it to run on its own. Our Creator God desires to be in relationship with His creation. This shouldn’t come as a surprise to you. Parents want to be in relationship with their children.

People need to know God’s Big Story. But how will they know unless someone tells them? God wants to use our stories to tell God’s Big Story.