Creation Calls

Genesis 1:1-31; Romans 14:1-4
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
January 31, 2021/Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

Today is week four of our annual Faith Questions sermon series. In your bulletins over the past few weeks, I have framed the question I will be addressing today in this way:

> How should I respond to those who understand creation differently?

That's not the actual question I received. The actual question was this one:

> How might we respond to friends who insist the world was created in six literal days?

I will hopefully address both versions of the question this morning, even if almost certainly not adequately. I will also hopefully make clear why I reframed the question as I did.

The next two sermons will both, in some form or another, be dealing with the question of how we, as Christians, ought to live with differences of opinion.

You may have noticed that Christians occasionally disagree? About the mechanics of creation, yes. About racism and white privilege, which is next week's topic, yes. But also, about pretty much anything and everything else under the sun.

And so, there are the issues that we differ on *and* there is the question of *how* we will differ. Both are important. In some cases—many cases, I would suggest—the latter question is more important than the former.

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But let's start with the former. Genesis 1 describes creation as unfolding over the course of six days.

Creation calls out to each one of us. But what is it saying? And how does it say what it wants to say?

Is Genesis 1 a literal description of how God created? Is this how we should think about the origins of our world and ourselves?

Well, based on the picture we get from modern science, the answer seems to be, no.

(Side note: we should retain at least some critical distance from how the word "science" often functions in contemporary discourse.

We often hear expressions like, "Just listen to the science." But of course, "what the science says" changes over time, sometimes quite rapidly, as we've seen during this pandemic.

And science does not interpret itself. When it comes to what we *do* with science and how we understand it, then we are in the realm of politics, and socioeconomics, and philosophy and even theology.

"Science" is a word that is often used as if by itself it settles the conversation, when this is manifestly not the case. The best scientists know this and appreciate the limits of science. And so we should both be profoundly grateful for science and aware of its limits.)

At any rate, based on archaeological evidence, the fossil record, cosmology, astronomy, and many other areas of scientific inquiry, the picture we get is of a universe that is very, very old, and which came into being via a long, gradual process. 4.543 billion years, according to the general scientific consensus.

If the book of Genesis is read literally as a scientific and chronological manual, the world was created somewhere between four and six thousand years ago.

4 billion and four thousand are slightly different.

So, how should we read Genesis 1? What kind of literature are we dealing with here? As Jennifer mentioned in her sermon last Sunday, the Apocrypha is not a "book" but a "library" containing different kinds of literature written to different audiences for different purposes.

The same is true of our bibles.

Genesis 1 was not written primarily to address the concerns of post-Enlightenment, post-modern Christians. It was not written as a journalistic account of the precise mechanics of how God made the world. It was not written as a science manual or a history textbook.

Genesis 1, it seems, was probably written or at least given its present structure around the time of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BC (six hundred years before the birth of Christ).

As such, and as Jen mentioned last week, one of the primary reasons it was written was to solidify the identity of the people of Israel, to explain to themselves who they were and who God was, and to remind themselves of God's purposes for them and for the world.

My strong suspicion is that our questions about the age of the earth and the mechanics of creation would have been utterly foreign to the people who first compiled and received this text.

Our questions and interests are not necessarily the ones it was written to address. It is crucially important to remember this. This doesn't mean our questions are illegitimate or uninteresting. It just means that we shouldn't go to Genesis 1 and force it to become something it isn't.

So, what *are* we dealing with in Genesis 1 if it's not science or ancient journalism? Well, not surprisingly, there is a range of opinions.

Many point to the poetic and liturgical shape of the text. Repetition is a powerful way to teach and to worship as Jen also mentioned last week, and as we heard when Zachary read from the Prayer of Azariah ("sing praise to the Lord, bless and highly exalt him forever").

Something similar is likely going on with the rhythmic nature of Genesis 1. "And God said, let there be… and God saw that it was good… and there was evening, morning… the naming of the days." It is a liturgy of creation meant to evoke praise.

Others (Wheaton College professor John Walton, for example) believe that Genesis 1 is "cosmic temple inauguration" that has less to do with how the world came into being than with the drawing of boundaries and the assigning of functions.

He compares descriptions of the creation of the cosmos with descriptions of the building of the temple and argues that Genesis 1 is a metaphorical description of the building of the place where God dwells.

There are many other scholars and perspectives that would add further shape to our understanding of Genesis 1, far too many to mention in a twenty-minute sermon.

So, if Genesis 1 wasn't written primarily to scratch our various itches as twenty-first century folks, why was it written?

There are at least three central things that I think Genesis 1 is trying to say to us.

The first is that God is one and not many.

The Biblical story uses similar entities to stories from other cultures in the ancient near east, but it presents them as *created* entities as opposed to *rival* deities (water, stars, sun, etc.) as is the case in Babylonian and Assyrian creation stories, for example.

The second thing is that God is separate from creation

Creation is not itself divine in any sense. Creation is initiated by divine word. In Gen 1 creation comes about by the effortless decree of God. This would eventually distinguish Israel from others.

Creation is not subject to manipulation because of some mysterious link between creation and Creator. Nature it is ordered and predictable (which, ironically, is a presupposition required by science).

The third thing is that human beings are neither gods, nor slaves of gods, but made in God's image

In other creation stories from the same time period, humans are often portrayed as being created to do the menial work of the gods. This was often used to justify hierarchical social structures.

In Gen 1, *all* human beings (male and female) are made in God's image. There is something of a democratization of the created order which opens the door to a social order far more egalitarian than other ancient cultures.

So, God is one, not many. God is separate from creation. And human beings are created to bear God's image and steward God's creation. This is what Genesis 1 is trying to say (on its terms, not ours).

It is the story of one good God who created a good world and human beings to bear his image in it, out of love.

I said earlier that the story told in Genesis 1 set it apart in important ways from other creation stories in the surrounding cultures in the ancient world.

It also sets it apart from the creation stories on offer in *our* culture.

One of the most prominent stories we hear, implicitly or explicitly, is that our world and human beings are accidental features of an inherently meaningless cosmos that came into existence not by the will of a creative and loving God, but by chance.

This is a story that many people espouse on an intellectual level but struggle to accept on an experiential level.

We need meaning. We crave it, we hunger for it. We long to know that there is a bigger story behind all of the wild chaos and beauty and joy and sorrow of our world and of our lives.

We must not lose sight of the crucial significance of what we are saying when we affirm that our world is the creation of a good God.

What it means is that our world was wanted, that it was the product of a will. It means that there is an "intendedness" to our world and to us. We were *meant to be*.

A bit later in the service, we're going to hear a familiar song. This is My Father's world. The song will be sung out of the old hymnal not the new one, where the words have been changed to "This is God's Wondrous World.

I think the change was made in the new hymnal to reflect changing norms on gender. God is not male or female, and some feel "father" language is too restrictive.

My own preference would be not to change the words because "father" language was used by Jesus himself. I say this even as I fully acknowledge that more maternal images of God have not received sufficient attention throughout Christian history. God is indeed far beyond gender.

But in this particular case (and I have my dad to thank for this insight), the most important word might not be "Father's" but "my."

Some of the relationality is lost when we move from “My father’s world” to “God’s wondrous world.”

Both are true, obviously. But the idea that we are the children of a personal God, created, wanted, loved, known in our particularity. These are some of the truths that the older version of the song reminds us of.

And this, I would submit, matters a great deal more than 4 billion or four thousand (both of which are fairly remote from our vantage point).

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Ok, so that’s how *I* would respond to the question of how to respond to someone who believes that the world was created in six literal days.

But my guess is that there’s more to the question than the question.

Perhaps I’m over-interpreting the question, but the sub-text seemed to be, “How do I interact with someone who’s very convinced that they’re right and that I’m wrong about an important matter of faith (and who aren’t being particularly generous about it!)

Too often, Christians have turned their particular understandings of creation (or other controversial matters) into a litmus test for faith.

If you don’t agree with me, you’re not only wrong but dangerously so! Your faith is suspect. If you don’t read the bible the way I do, I can’t be in relationship with you.

This is, sadly, how Christians have often operated, particularly since the Protestant Reformation. And of course, Mennonites are as good at this as anyone else.

And so, I should say here that while I am reasonably convinced in what I have said thus far this morning and while I have read fairly widely on this topic and studied the Scriptures as well as I can, I could be wrong. What then?

This is where we turn to our passage from Romans 14. Paul is negotiating some tension between believers who differ on what food are acceptable to eat and what days should be set aside for worship.

Paul urges the church to bear with one another, to allow each other to follow our convictions on “non-essentials.”

The essentials are clear enough: the centrality of the life, death, teaching, resurrection, and future reign of Christ are non-negotiable. These are the core of what it means to be a Christian. If we treat these as optional, we have, I think, ceased to be Christian in any meaningful way.

But on other matters, there is room for disagreement on things. I would submit this is true even for something as important as the doctrine of creation, provided that we don’t shed the conviction *that* God created, and that the world was *intended to be* by a good God.

But even *if* and *when* we disagree about the question of what counts as central and what counts as peripheral, I think we *still* have an obligation to refuse to go down the road of judgmentalism. We *still* have an obligation to “not live to ourselves” but to our neighbour.

It’s not as though Paul is saying, if you differ with someone on peripheral matters you need to bear with one another and mutually submit for the building up of our neighbours, but if you differ on *important* matters, well then treat them however you want!

That would be absurd. But this is sometimes what we see, isn’t it? Christians can be very nasty when they are defending their views about theology or biblical interpretation or morality!

We must resist the temptation to judgment. It is poison in the church, poison to our souls.

We do not live to ourselves. This is Paul’s crucial point in Romans 14 and elsewhere. Our default ought to always be to put the needs of others ahead of our own, even (or especially) when we think they’re wrong).

So, in response to the question of how might we respond to friends who insist the world was created in six literal days?

Well, I would say that if our convictions differ from theirs, we ought to respectfully articulate these to the best of our ability, identify points of agreement, acknowledge that we don’t know everything about this either…

And then decide that as a Christian the more important task is to honour the humanity of our neighbour in love.

Paul puts it interestingly in 14:3-4 when he says that the very people that we might condemn (inwardly or outwardly) are the ones that God has accepted, and who God is able to make stand.

Even if you think someone is out to lunch on their views (about creation or anything else), God is able to make them stand. Your judgment or my judgment is not necessary.

Whatever we might think about someone's understanding of this or that issue, we have a duty as Jesus' followers to love them and treat them with respect and dignity as an image-bearer of God, dearly loved—a fellow person for whom Christ died.

I am convinced that this is a crucial part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

And I am equally convinced that a church that knows and shows how to treat people who think differently, who loves and listens even during disagreement, will be a desperately necessary model in a culture where we increasingly shout at or past each other.

Christians have been disagreeing about things for a *long* time. This isn't going to change. But what *can* change, and what *must* change is how Christians treat those with whom they disagree.

May God help us to reflect the image of our Creator well, in being grateful stewards of this good world God has given us, and in being extending love and understanding to our fellow divine image-bearers.

Amen.