

A Hop, Skip and a Jump Through the Bible: “In The Beginning... and Just Thereafter!”

Genesis 1:1-5, 26-27, 31

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the 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. ³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Dr. Fred Craddock is a much-beloved teacher of preachers and a wonderful interpreter of scripture. Fred tells the story of lying in his yard one night with his dad when he was a kid and munching on the grass, gazing at the glory of the stars. This was back in the days before we all hovered like moths around the ghostly glow of 990 cable channels and satellite dish-ruption. Craddock’s dad said to him, “Son, how far can you think?” Fred said, “What?” “How far can you think?” “Dad, I don’t know what you mean.” “Just think as far as you can up towards those stars.” Young Fred squinted his eyes, screwed down his imagination, and said, “I’m thinking... I’m thinking... I’m thinking...” His dad said, “Think as far as you can think.” He said, “I am, I’m thinking as far as I can think.” “Well, drive down a *stake* out there now,” his dad said. “In your mind, drive down a stake. Have you driven down the stake? That’s as far as you can think?” “Yes sir.” His dad said, “Now what’s on the other side of your stake?” Fred said, “Well, there’s more sky.” “Then move your stake,” his dad said. “Move your stake.” And they spent the evening moving his stake out there among the stars. Says Craddock, “It was a crazy thing to do, but I will never thank him enough for doing it.”

Have you ever attempted to contemplate the divine? Have you ever stretched your mind as far as it will go, and then realized you haven’t begun to grasp even a grain of sand in this garden universe we inhabit? That whenever you think you’ve grasped the totality of God, you realize that your God is too small and you’ve got to pick up your stake and move it further, much further, out? That there’s more sky beyond, more stars, more galaxies, more galactic clusters, superclusters, and more beyond that, “world without end” Amen! If so, then

perhaps you have approached the great central perception that is lodged here in the very first sentence of the book we now call “Genesis,” the book of beginnings.

Genesis is the first installment in what Ellsworth Kalas calls the Grand Eternal Plot. It initiates the story of the long love affair of God with God’s creation, humankind, the narrative of our distrust and avoidance of God and of God’s determined pursuit and reclamation of us. And it all begins “In the beginning.” With God who *cannot* not-exist, with God who, like a person, desires relationship, and a universe which is completely dependent upon God.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Our minds simply boggle at that. We see things come into existence and pass away over and over again. We know that all life is transient. The primal religious perception of the ancient Hebrews is that this is not accidental. This universe was brought into being by a conscious decision, a deliberate act, by One who has always been: by God, that being who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, the One who necessarily exists, and cannot not-exist.

Using a phrase from forty years ago, this really “blows my mind.” Contemplating God as being “uncreated” has actually brought about an experience of the divine, the ‘noumenal,’ within me. Have you ever attempted this? I remember when I was much younger, in High School, attempting to comprehend why anything exists at all. Why is there anything rather than nothing? We can turn the idea of creation into an endless regression. We can say, “Well, God created the world. Ah, but who created God?” Our minds simply are incapable of imagining that which is uncreated. Well, if “God” was created by something else, then that which created “God” would actually be God. God is the uncreated. The One who exists of necessity. The One who cannot not-exist. However far back you take a regression of creation at some point you’ve got to say “This exists of necessity.”

So Genesis starts, not with a Hop, Skip and a Jump, but with the creative Word. God spoke the universe into being in an act of deliberation and purpose. God creates. Thus begins the story, the “Grand Eternal Plot,” of God who saw that relationship is good, and created the universe, this world and all that is in it, including man and woman in God’s very image, and at every step along the way declared that it is good. However we frame it, the words of Genesis are not attempting to give anything like a scientific explanation of reality. What the writers of Genesis give us is a deep perception into the very core of reality. What they are attempting to say is that Life is no accident; All things come from God and were declared as good; We are dependent upon God and when we deny that

we go terribly astray; But God seeks us and spares no effort, no cost, to restore us.

And here comes the first twist in this grand, eternal plot. In this edenic creation, a serpent came upon the first created folks, and sows the seed of distrust between us and God. This snake-in-the-grass asks Eve “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” She replies, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” With those words, a suspicion about God’s trustworthiness is raised and a wedge of division is driven into human minds and nothing is ever the same.

This is our first dramatic turn. For us as moral beings, as creatures with the power of choice, this is the central matter that spins us away from the initial harmony of creation. Humankind begins to distrust God and to question the goodness of God’s very nature. And from this point, the play is on. Adam and Eve cast from the Garden, their sons Cain and Abel caught up in a murderous dance and then exile, Seth and his children leading to Noah – the generations just start to fly by. Then Sarah and Abraham faithfully following the leading of God out of Ur, Sarah laughing hilariously at God’s messenger declaring that she’ll have a son at age 90, that son Isaac and his uncomplicated son Esau and his complex trickster son Jacob, who has his comeuppance by the Jabbok River wrestling with God who changes his name to what? Israel! And then Israel’s descendants including Joseph who takes up no less than a third of this first book of God’s mighty acts. They are all part of this grand, eternal plot, the grand sweep of the story of humankind, who have lost their connection with God and in so many broken and fallible ways are trying to find their way back into a life-giving relationship with God. And this is the story of our lostness as well.

Have you read Anne Tyler’s novel, *A Patchwork Planet*? She tells the story of Barnaby Gaitlin, a petty thief who breaks into people’s homes, not to steal their silver or their stereos, but to read their mail, to look at their family pictures, to take mementos of sentimental value. He constructs narratives, inserts himself into their lives as a way of “getting a life” because his life as it is isn’t enough. And isn’t that what we are all trying to do? Get a life? A life of meaning and purposeful relationship? But where do we find it?

“Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee,” Augustine confessed. Or as one preacher put it, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in each of us and all the spiritual junk-food we stuff into that space will never meet our hunger.” It isn’t

hard to see the restlessness, the emptiness, the dissatisfaction, the lack of meaning in people's lives which make them vulnerable to all kinds of spiritual quacks and unhealthy connections. So many people are searching for God and don't even realize it, though most of their addictions and excesses are actually inadequate God-substitutes.

Now and then in my own life, I have felt I lost the connection I once had with God. When God didn't come through for me the way I expected, when God didn't answer my prayers the way I had hoped, when God turned out to be different from what I believed and had always been taught, I felt I had lost God somehow. It can happen so quickly. A bad day at the office, an argument with a friend, the doctor says you need tests – suddenly you're spinning out of control into a godless void. But where do you look to find a lost God – or to find God when *you* are lost? That's the story of everything just after Creation. It's *your* story and mine. And it begins right here, "*in the beginning.*"

What we will attempt to do during the course of this summer is to present the grand sweep of the Biblical narrative. There will be times we'll wish to linger over a story, a person, an insight, a twist or unexpected turn. Scripture is full of such points to relish. But it's the grand sweep, that "Grand Eternal Plot," we're going after. We invite you on the journey. Dive into this plot. Join the Tuesday evening class that will study Ellsworth Kalas' sweet little book "A Hop, Skip, and a Jump Through the Bible" and discover his take on the grand sweep of biblical narrative. His book emerged out of his simple three hour workshop which he presented here some years ago. In it he led people through the entire Bible in just three hours. To have a summer to do the same is a luxury in comparison and we hope you'll take advantage of the time.

So there we have Genesis. There was morning and evening, the first day. The first book of God's mighty acts. It's a grand story. And it's still our story. "Is anything too wonderful for God?" the strange messenger asks Sarah and Abraham when he declares that ancient Sarah will have a baby.¹ Makes you think, doesn't it? Makes you imagine. Makes me wonder what wonderful things God may be wanting to bring to miraculous birth among us, things we might think impossible now, dreams just too good to be true. This grand eternal plot almost demands that I pick up the stakes of what I've imagined about God and move them farther out beyond any imaginable limits.

That's something thing we don't do enough of in the church: imagining the good, the wonderful things of God. We work so hard at talking about the rules, at teaching the standards and principles, at getting the wayward to color between the

lines, we discourage the chaos of imagination and creativity and possibility. Oh, we're pretty good at imagining disaster, at seeing the worst case scenario, of worrying our finances, at dreaming bad dreams. It seems we can always imagine the reasons why something is impossible. But what about dreaming good dreams? What about imagining the good for God's good creation? What about asking ourselves "Is anything too wonderful for God?"

I recall a college philosophy examination. One of the essay questions was "Define God. Be brief." I was concise, if not brief, as there were many things I could – and did – say about God. And at the end I noted that brevity was a good instruction because it reminds us that all the paper in the world wouldn't be enough to do the job of describing God. The reason is that we can't contain God in words. The best we can do is art and music. The best we can do is ritual and symbol. And so we have this sacred supper which helps us remember, gets our attention, tells us to listen up to the best there is. In the beginning, God was before all else and the source of all else. And this One who is beyond our imagination has revealed God's self unsurpassably in Jesus, the living Word. We'll get to this Jesus as we make our way in this grand eternal plot. And Jesus is alive and among us, still speaking, telling us one by one "You are not forgotten, you are not abandoned, you are not despised and rejected. You are beloved of God and you are welcomed back."

So come to this table and hear God's Word for you today. Come to the table and encounter the word, experience the word, consume the word. Come to the table and absorb the word into your deepest being. Come to the table and receive the gift of God's life-changing love for you. Come to the table and hear what God has been saying since the beginning.

1. Genesis 18:14