

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

September 23, 2007

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

The Text: Genesis 1:1-24

The Title: *The Covenantal Dance*

8:30 and 10:30 am, Holy Communion

The Creation of the World

1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 7 And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. 8 And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. 10 God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

11 And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to

its kind. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. 16 And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. 17 And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." 21 So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

24 And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so. 25 And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

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Introduction:

This morning we are beginning a ten part series on the Book of Genesis, chapters 1-11. As we take the time over these next two and a half months to ponder these remarkable chapters of the Bible, it is my prayer that both you the listener and I the preacher will be stretched and challenged as we come to a greater understanding and appreciation of this opening section of the Bible. This is a portion of Scripture that is perhaps the most puzzling and controversial part of the whole Bible. For here are stories over which people have arrived at diverse and often contradictory conclusions.

As we study Genesis I want to begin by suggesting that the interpretive key to chapters one to eleven is the word Covenant. This

Covenant is the one that God has written, not with pen and ink. Rather it has been interwoven into the very universe he has created.

A covenant is a promise that involves at least two parties. In this covenant the parties are God and his creation. While God is the initiator of the covenant, creation, and especially the human creature, is not passive recipient of God's promises. That is because this covenant is like a finally choreographed dance with God as the lead. Creation is intended to respond to God as a woman responds to the man who takes the lead in ballroom dancing.

In this covenant we are given an understanding of how God interacts with his creation and what his desire is for this creation. This is what chapters and two consider. We will also see what happens when God's dance partner, us humans, choose not to keep in step with him. Genesis three forward describes these missteps in vivid detail.

And yet the story does not begin with the dance out of step. Rather when we turn to Genesis one, we see how God wanted to lead the dance and how we, however imperfectly, can learn to get back into step and rhythm with Him.

So with the preliminary words out of the way, let us turn to the matter at hand, Genesis 1: 1-24.

This most wonderful passage, which is unique in the literature of the world, delineates God's covenant purpose through the interplay of two ideas best described as boundaries and blessings. As we study this text today I would like you to keep the words boundaries and blessings in mind because we are going to return to consider their significance in a few minutes.

In order for us to see how these words interplay in the text there are four points that I want to highlight this morning:

1. God is at the Centre of His Creation
2. God Creates Through His Word
3. God sets Boundaries for his creation
4. God sets these boundaries so he can then bless his creation

1. God is at the Centre of His Creation:

As we look to this text you will notice something about the use of the verbs. God is the active subject of them all. I want to take a moment

to show this to you by looking at the verbs used in verses 1-7 starting with verse 1:

“God created the heavens and the earth”

This is a summary of the whole chapter. The verb “created” that is used here is found only 48 times in the Old Testament. God is always the subject of this verb. In each case it has the sense of God bringing order and organization to his universe and less to do with the creation of matter.¹ So when Genesis begins with this verb “God created” it implies that God’s primary work in relation to his creation is to bring it in to order. This is the main point of these first twenty four verse of Genesis one.

Having used this initial verb notice the subsequent verbs in verses 2-5:

The Spirit of God **was hovering** over the face of the waters.

And **God said**, "Let there be light,"

And **God saw** that the light was good.

And **God separated** the light from the darkness.

God called the light Day,

the darkness **he called** Night.

As we read through the rest of the chapter the verbs build like a crescendo. Every active verb has God as the subject. Seven times in these verses it declares “God said”, Six times we are told: “God saw” Five times we read “God called” Three times “God separated” and once “God set”.

It is so important for us to understand what Genesis is establishing here. This is not a passage that is trying to give us a scientific explanation of the creation of the universe, nor is it declaring that the first five days encompass a span of 120 hours. This is obvious when we realize that the sun and moon are not created until the fourth day. Therefore days one through three cannot be seen as solar days. Also, when we get to the end of the seventh day, the refrain “There was evening and there was morning”, is omitted. As we will see next week, we are still living in the seventh day of creation.

¹ John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary Genesis* (Zondervan 2001), page 71

So to attempt to read these verses through a scientific lens will result in our focus being in the wrong place.

What Genesis is interested in doing is to show us is that God is at the centre of the universe in which we live. This is such a profound truth for us to understand and one that is freeing when we see its implications. Because you and I are such limited and near sighted creatures we are so often caught up in the demands and pressures of our daily lives. I know that when I am experiencing an overwhelming sense of stress and pressure because of the responsibilities I face, I very easily think I am the subject of every verb. When this is carried to an extreme and I feel unable to cope with life's pressures I can become filled with anxiety and feel that I am woefully inadequate.

When I am in a place like this, I need to read Genesis one again. It reminds me that I am not the subject of the most important verbs but rather one of the objects upon whom God is acting. This is made clear to us in Colossians 1: 15-17 where Paul fills out what Genesis teaches:

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.

Do you see what this is saying? Jesus is the one who is the subject, not only of the verbs in Genesis one, but he is holding everything together up to this present moment. Without Jesus as the subject we could not even exist as the object of his loving action.

2. Not only is God at the centre of his creation but the way he creates is by His Word.

This is the second point. Notice how the verb used most often in these verses is the verb "God Said" and the third most common verb is "God called". God does not bring existence into being through the use of his hands or some cosmic steam shovel. He speaks and creation responds in obedience to his will. And that means that the great connection between God and his world is through his word. One of the reasons why week by week we read, pray and study God's word is because of what we read in this creation narrative. The connection between God and his world is through his word. That is why God's people are people of the ear and not the eye. God is primarily present too us through his word and not through images.

As creation lives in relationship with God through his word we discover something. God sees that his creation is good and indeed beautiful. This tells us something remarkable about God. It tells us that God delights in delight. He loves what is beautiful. And that everything that was originally made fulfilled his desire for a good and beautiful creation.

Why is this? It is because Genesis one shows us creation responding in obedience to God's word. As we will see in a couple of weeks when we get to Genesis chapter three, it is when we as the human creature disobey God's word that all of creation is also affected. But for now what we need to see here in Genesis is that the first emotion God experiences in relation to his creatures is that of pleasure because creation is interacting with Him just as he intends and therefore it is esthetically pleasing to him.

It is worth noting that when we turn of to John 14 Jesus picks up on this theme of obedience to His word when he says: "If you love me, show it by doing what I've told you" Do you see the connection here? The creation perfectly loves the creator because it responds to him by fully doing what he tells it. As we grow in our life as disciples of Jesus we desire to grow in listening to Jesus because this is a way that particularly delights God, thus showing that we are dancing to his lead.

Bridge between points two and three: The Structure Genesis 1

Not only is God at the centre of his creation which he creates by his word, but he does this for a very particular purpose. Remember, I said a few minutes ago that the verb "created" implicitly expresses the idea of order and organization to the universe. This is exactly what we see happening in Genesis 1:

In order to see this we have to grasp something of the structure of these verses:

At verse 2 we read that the earth was without form and void. To say that it is without form means that it has no shape, no boundaries. To say that it is void means that it is without habitation. This is the literal meaning of the words. The deeper symbolic sense indicates that the cosmos was empty of purpose, meaning and function, a place that had no order or intelligibility.²

And it is the giving of this order and intelligibility that takes place here.

² John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary Genesis* (Zondervan 2001), page 73

Look at how these verses are structured. The seven days of creation are not just a flat seven days. There are two triplets. Days one, two, three perfectly match days four five and six. One two three go from the heavens through the water and to the earth. And four, five, six from the heavens through the waters and to the earth.

In day one and four there is one created act. In days two and five there is one act with two aspects. On days three and six there are two created acts.

Here is the remarkable thing. On days 1-3 God is forming the world. In days four to six he is filling it. Forming and filling. Do you see how this associates with what we read in verse 2 when it says that the earth was without form and void? What happens in the first three days is that God gives form and structures and boundaries to the world. He creates limitations and he makes the world habitable. Then in days four to six he blesses and fills and gives life and people.

Please listen to this: Days one through three are about boundaries and days four to six are about blessings. This is the main point of Genesis 1:1-24. In this creation that God has created boundaries and blessing to go together.

So let's take a moment to think about each of these points:

3. **God sets boundaries for his creation:**

Please follow along as I read these verses from Genesis verse 3 and following. Pay special attention to the use of the verb "separated".

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

6 And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 7 And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse

9 And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. 10 God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

All of these separations serve God's order. They create distinctions, and they create places. There is no confusion. That is why each time God makes something it happens each according to its own kind. This

is also why God names everything. He names light, day and darkness night to show that both are under his sovereign will and purpose. They are both his.

There are two implications to this. Because God has separated his creation with boundaries, scientific pursuits are affirmed by what we read in Genesis 1. This world is not irrational or random. It is regular and predictable because of the boundaries that the creator has established. And it is because of these boundaries that scientists can study the created order and come to a fuller understanding of the multifaceted systems that are at play in this intricate creation.

The second implication points us forward to the confusion that we all can experience when there is a violation of boundaries. Life is filled with experiences of suffering. When we are in the midst of such suffering it can feel like the boundaries have all been removed. Life, rather than being ordered, is filled with disorder. When we find ourselves suffering, be it the result of illness, broken relationships, financial trouble or ruin, emotional and mental illness, we can very much feel that life is without form and void.

I want to remind us of what we read in Job last winter. For 35 chapters his friends had been sending him hallmark cards as Job faced every conceivable kind of loss. Their words have not comforted him at all, but instead made his anguish worse. So in chapter 36 Job cries out to God and says in effect: "What is the point of believing in you. I have been faithful to you through all my life and yet I have been afflicted with the death of my children, the loss of my reputation, the loss of my property and health. I feel as if there are no boundaries. Faith in you is therefore futile."

Listen to the language God uses when responding to Job's anguish. It is the language of boundaries. In chapter 38 at verse four we read:

4 " Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

Then in verse 8 we read these words:

8 "Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb,
9 when I made clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
10 and prescribed limits for it
and set bars and doors,

11and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stayed'?

Do you see what is going on here? God wants us to know that there are boundaries. Even when we are in the midst of great suffering and anguish we still belong to God. There is a limit for the clouds and darkness and the sea shall be contained within certain parameters. Even when suffering might result in our death we are to know that there are boundaries it cannot exceed. This is why Paul is able to say in Romans 8:38 of Jesus' love for us:

"38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Did you get this? Nothing in creation will be able to separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is because he has established parameters that can bring order out of the seeming disorder of our lives. Paul is saying that there is nothing that can happen that can take us outside the purview God's sovereign will and grace.

God sets these boundaries so that he can then bless his creation.

The reason why God set boundaries is because into these boundaries he wants to place his blessings. At its most basic, blessing means "to fill with the potential for life." This is everywhere evident in days four and five and as we will see next week on day six. God takes the creatures that he has made and places them in the boundaries for their safety and protection and then blesses them with this potential of life giving and blessing. Here the blessing of God is given to us right into a natural physical process. This physical world is the vehicle and place for God's blessing. God's blessing is not out there some where in the region far beyond. It is in this life. So here is the one point of the passage. The blessings that God has given he has given within his boundaries. This is the covenant God has interwoven into creation and is worked out over the sixty six books of the Old and New Testaments. It is the dance of blessings within boundaries that God leads and invites us to take his hands and follow.

How different this is from the basic impulse of pagan religion, which is the exact opposite. It is the longing to dissolve all difference and mix everything up together. The way pagan religion works is that you take the categories of creation and break them open and cross them so you

can release spiritual energy. So the sexual orgy in pagan religion was a way to rejuvenate the world by plunging it back into the created chaos.³

The culture that you and I live in is allergic to the idea of limitations and boundaries and is influenced much more by paganism than it is Genesis 1. Life and blessings cannot be lived within the boundaries God has set. It has to be lived outside of these boundaries. We see this everywhere in the culture. The motto "Live beyond our boundaries" is the modern creed. We don't want to face any limitations or have to govern ourselves according to what God says. But such attitudes do not create a world where there is order and blessing. Rather it creates chaos that infects society at so many levels. What we need to understand is that Genesis 1 shows us that we deceive ourselves if we think we can live outside of God's blessings and God's boundaries. For as Genesis three and following will show us to implode the boundaries leads to the blessings being removed and chaos ensuing at the marital, familial, spiritual and societal levels.

So we can be thankful that the God we know and worship is at the centre of this universe he has created by his word. When we know him and his will we in turn learn to live within his boundaries and thus know his blessings that fill us with the potential for life and goodness as we follow his the in the covenantal dance.

Amen.

³ This idea is taken from an audio sermon by the Reverend David Short: *The Week at a Glance* preached at St John's Shaughnessy, Vancouver B.C. on September 24, 2006.