

September 12, 2017  
**The Point of the Poem Is Praise**  
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Genesis 1:1-2:4a

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

*<sup>6</sup> And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” <sup>7</sup> So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. <sup>8</sup> God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.*

*<sup>9</sup> And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. <sup>10</sup> God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. <sup>11</sup> Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. <sup>12</sup> The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.*

*<sup>14</sup> And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, <sup>15</sup> and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. <sup>16</sup> God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. <sup>17</sup> God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, <sup>18</sup> to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.*

*<sup>20</sup> And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” <sup>21</sup> So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. <sup>22</sup> God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” <sup>23</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.*

*<sup>24</sup> And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. <sup>25</sup> God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.*

<sup>26</sup> Then 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."

<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." <sup>29</sup> God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. <sup>30</sup> And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. <sup>31</sup> God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

<sup>2</sup> Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. <sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. <sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

<sup>4</sup> These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

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<sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
<sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them...

Hearing the words from the 8<sup>th</sup> Psalm, do any of us assume that the psalmist is actually trying to tell us, once and for all, that God has literal hands with ten actual fingers? Of course not; the psalmist is not speaking of divine anatomy but, rather, is singing a love song. The kind in which lovers say the silliest things, trying to tell the world why the One they love is so amazing.

Genesis chapter one should be as easy to preach as any love song ever written. It is the overture to the story of God and Israel, the part before the first characters come on stage – when the story was still perfect, because it hadn't actually begun yet. Sort of like the baby nursery looks right before you bring home an actual baby. Sweet. Everything matches. There's a theme. After which it is buried in laundry and smells like sour milk and poo.

But Genesis 1 isn't easy to preach. At least not for me, because a tiny wink of time ago, some preachers in the post-enlightenment West decided it wasn't a love song after all but, rather, a science book. And ever after, other preachers have been standing up here trying their best to sound like scientists, which some of them could pull off – like my philosophy professor in seminary, Dr. Glen Stassen. He held advanced degrees in chemistry along with theology and philosophy. The thing was, Dr. Stassen never treated Genesis like a science book. Always, rather, like poetry. Like the Psalms.

How does a person preach twenty-five years and still shy away from pages of scripture as beautiful as this? There's no good answer and one bad one: fear. Fear of nothing really – of simply not wanting to face a subject about which she doesn't feel competent.

So, study – and tell what truth you do know. It's not rocket science. Or evolutionary biology either, for that matter. Both are real. Neither is on this page of the Bible. On this page of the Bible is poetry, written by a people telling the story of their life together in God.

It's the prologue of a book that could have been titled The Rise & Fall of the People of Israel in Their Quest to Be the People of God at Which They Mostly Failed But There Were Some Really Amazing Moments; A Love Story. Over and over and over again in the telling of this long story, the storytellers run out of prose ... and then they do what writers almost always do in those situations. They sing. They turn to poetry.

The prose, the narrative, takes up less than half the Old Testament. The rest is the law, the poetry, and the prophecy that came out of the story being told. Again – Genesis 1 being the overture. How many times, when you watched a movie the second time, did you see so many things that made sense once you knew the ending of the story? Little bits that you didn't catch the first time around. I love this in Lars & the Real Girl. The story takes a year to tell, and the weather matches the story being told. And I especially love it in The Boy in the Striped Pajamas. A beautiful movie, hard to watch but beautiful. Stripes are in nearly every shot of that movie – in bed linens, in the architecture. So subtle. So layered. So much texture.

In the Bible too. In Genesis too. We have to read it all to know that this first page didn't get written in real time. It matters to know that it came together at the time when Israel thought she'd probably reached the end. When the Babylonians finally wiped out the rest of Judah near the end of the 6th century and the last of the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. Others had escaped into Egypt years before. The land called Israel was occupied by Babylon and the ground was devastated. Most had started over as Babylonian citizens, were raising families and working there, with no plans to change. A few dreamed of returning to Israel, but that was a dim hope at best. Exile lasted over 70 years. 70 years! And returning meant starting over from literally nothing, in a land with no infrastructure, no government, no economy, nothing.

So some of the prophets in exile, rightly so, began to think maybe somebody ought to write their story down before everyone who could tell it was dead and gone. So whoever picked up that first sheet of lambskin upon which to write this story, dipped his quill and scratched out "*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.*" Because – honestly – how does one begin the story of one's life when one's life seems to be a total failure? That was Israel-in-Babylon's writing prompt.

Once upon a time... before there was time at all... there was only God... until the time God chose not to be all that was. And God began to shape out of all that God-ness... something smaller. Starting with wet that was sky... and wet that was earth.... *Wet* and *sky* and *earth* at the time being wordless things, of course, as no speakers had yet come forth to have need of words.

And so it went, the poem. The earth and sky. Light and dark. Plants and animals. Human beings. A Relationship full of love and grief – not that the two are different things. When the composers had their story in its final form, it was a long poem written by people who had started out believing they'd lost everything and ended up realizing they'd miscalculated. What seemed like *everything*... wasn't.

I keep thinking about people in shelters wondering what's left of their houses? Wondering if they are more sad at what they will lose or more glad at what they will keep. From this sunshiny Indiana moment, all I can do is wonder? I've lost nothing. Nor expect to. Which isn't to say I haven't. Or won't, eventually. We write from what we know, of course. Israel wrote from exile; but what if there had been no exile? Would they even have felt the need to write it? And if so, would page one have started, *In the beginning God created Jerusalem...?*

But what's the use of dreaming dreams like, *What if there had been no exile? What if this or that or the other thing had never happened? If we'd left earlier. Or later? If we hadn't gone at all?* Tim Grimm has a lyric, "life can go from sweet to sad in one heartbeat." Then there are those losses and disasters with the long, slow wind-up. The ones we feel coming forever, but they are soft enough for long enough we can pretend we don't see and feel them coming. Or that what we see is probably something else. Or that there is still time to turn the ship... Until there isn't.

When all the losses were finally counted up, you know what those Israelites in Babylon discovered. The ones still interested in God's part of it all. They discovered that all was NOT lost after all. They went back over and over the story and confessed that God had never promised life would always be easy. God never promised life wouldn't sometimes be scary and dangerous. God never promised not to take back stuff previously given – land, for instance. Or wealth or worldly influence. God doesn't promise to ignore human disobedience and rebellion, no matter how well-dressed, high-minded or spiritual the disobedience may be.

God promised to love and never leave. And it took Israel in exile more than fifty years to figure that out. Many more years, when you add the generations of disobedience that preceded exile in the first place. All that time and trauma and grief to discover that what God promised at the beginning – to Abraham, to Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses – was a promise still kept to them in Babylon, when and where they thought all was lost. The same promise is still intact.

God was with them. God had always been with them. Before they were, God was. As refugees and immigrants, God still was. God wasn't going anywhere, since God always had been everywhere. *God with us* was the only promise God could make and keep, if God was going to make human beings free to obey or not. Human beings were made free to ruin positively everything else – and we have not disappointed, for the most part. We humans are on track to ruin creation itself.

For so long as life is good and kind to us, we have the luxury of believing ourselves to be the apple of God's eye, the center of the universe itself. But not until we lose everything we thought was evidence of our *chosen-ness* do we find ourselves corrected. Israel was corrected. But not in Jerusalem, try as God did through generations of prophets. Israel was corrected after the fact, in exile. Corrected in their understanding of chosenness. Chosenness was not a matter of geography and real estate, after all. THE PROMISE was a promise of presence. Not land, not wealth. Not power.

Presence. *I am with you*. A promise unbroken by 400 years in captivity, 40 years in the wilderness, 500 years on the land promised to them, and now in exile too. The promise holds as fast as ever. So that, in exile they found themselves with all that God had ever promised them in the first place – I AM with you – with no way to speak of it except poetry. Poetry – the language in which we tell our deepest truths, in words that make little sense at all when held in certain kinds of light.

Likewise with Genesis. The Creator God. Nesting, like expectant parents always do. Not with extra diapers and receiving blankets, but with light and dark and air and sea. With birds that fly and creatures that creep. And trees and flowers and every living thing to delight the eye and fill the belly and be our home.

*"See how much God loved and wanted us!"* Genesis 1 proclaims.

The point of the poetry is praise.

No infant ever came home from the hospital, looked around his nursery, and said, "I'll take it." Neither did humanity for the first few hundred years. Not until they thought they had lost it all. *We thought we lost everything and discovered we only need one thing – God, the God who made us and keeps us even now.*

Genesis 1 is the first page of the scriptures and the last – and every page in between on which somebody after God's own heart finds themselves in God's hands, having been there all along.