

“The Covenant for All”
Genesis 1:1-2:4a
June 11, 2017
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The very beginning of the Bible, very logically, is the story of creation. This is how everything began. But also, not very logically, the first words of the Bible were not the first words of the Bible to be written. Lots of you know through Bible studies that you have been part of, that the Bible is a collection of books, histories, songs, and sayings written at different times throughout history. Some of you are also familiar with the idea that there are two stories about creation in the book of Genesis, one in Chapter one and another in Chapter 2. But as best we can tell, the story from Chapter one that we just read was written in the Sixth Century before Christ, while Chapter two is probably about three hundred years older. But for some reason, those who compiled these texts into what we know as the Bible put this story first, perhaps because this story is the one that gives a broad, universal perspective. That's the first thing I want to point out about the creation story and the covenant that God makes in these pages. It is a covenant with everyone. Notice that this is not a story about how God created the nation of Israel. It is not a story about how God created a particular nation or race or gender or group of people. Verse 27 says, “So God created humankind . . . male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'” That blessing and that command is given to humankind, to everyone; there is no one who is left out of this covenant. It is for all people. Everywhere and everywhen. It was for them, it is for us.

But what does it mean? What is this covenant about? You may have noticed that I left out a couple of words when I read verse 27. “So God created humankind *in his image, in the image of God he created them.*” What does that mean to be made in God’s image? That’s another mystery that I don’t fully understand, but I’m getting more comfortable with this one than with the Trinity. I don’t think it means that God looks like us—probably a good thing there. But for me I believe it means that we reflect God,

like a mirror reflects our image, we are made to reflect God's image to the rest of creation. Dave

Bland, who is a preaching professor in Memphis, says about the image of God:

"This is one of the reasons God insists on Israel not making images of the God they worship. God's image is already place within humans; no other kind of representation is necessary. As God's image bearers, male and female are given a responsibility: to have dominion over the created order. Humans are given dominion, not domination; they are caregivers, not exploiters. We do unto creation as God has done unto us; we express love and care toward the world. Being image bearers of God is also at the heart of how we see other humans, which results in treating them with dignity, regardless of race, age, gender, social or economic status." (Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 3, p. 31)

We are supposed to represent God to each other and to the rest of creation. That's what being made in God's image means, being the reflection of God to those who see us.

The creation story tells us that we are to be caretakers, good stewards of what God has given us. This obviously has implications in how we care for the earth, how we approach issues of climate change, wildlife, energy use and all the issues of the environment. But it also has implications for our care for our church that God has given us, our congregation that God has given us to, our families, our friendships, our intimate relationships, that are all gifts of God. We are caretakers of all of them because God has made us in his image and he cares for all of us. What God cares about, we care about. For far too often and for far too long we human beings have played with the world we have been given as if it could always sustain whatever we decided to do. We are now learning that such activity is no longer sustainable. This is the upshot of the crisis we now face. Our belief that human beings are the center of creation, that all activities and behaviors occur because of our human needs and our human comforts, that the land and soil and water and air are ours to use in any ways we desire, have been based on a jaundiced and finally appalling reading of Genesis 1. We have in fact "dominated" the non-human creation; we have in fact "subdued" the land and all its gifts. And the result has been disaster: over-fished seas, threatened bees and birds, withering drought, fouled air.

It is time for us, past time, to end this foolish and incorrect notion that it is our world. It is, and always has been, God's world. How dare we claim to be made in the image of this God and act as if God had

and has nothing to do with it? How dare we pray to this God for help while we continue to act in God's world as if we were more devils than God-like creatures? I think it is time for us to discard this image of dominators and subduers, bequeathed to us by a misreading of this text.¹

However, if we remember that this world is a covenant, not a gift, and it is one that is made to all of us, and that includes people of every nation and race and it includes people yet to be born. We do not own the world as an inheritance from previous generations, but we do hold it in trust for our children and grandchildren.

This first covenant in scripture is a covenant for all of us and it is a covenant of stewardship of the earth. And the last thing I want to highlight about this covenant goes back to the first words of the story. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." That's how some Bible will translate that first verse. Our New Revised Standard Version says, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,". One is a full sentence, one is what's called a temporal clause. What's the difference? The issue is whether or not God is done. We could read this chapter and decide that at the end of the six days, God is done and everything is completed. But we can translate the first verse as "In the beginning when God began to create the heavens and the earth." That means that God is not yet done with his creation. I know God is not yet done with me, why should I think that God is done with the world? I think I like the image of a God that is still working on me and still working on the world. And if that is true, if we have a dynamic, involved creator, then as creatures who are made in his image, who are supposed to represent him, then maybe we are involved in that work as well.

¹ Textweek.org, *Genesis 1:1-2:4*.