



LESSONS IN LIVING

What We Can Learn from the Creation Myth in Genesis:

“Part 1: In the Beginning”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5 (*New International Version*)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

Sermon

Before I start, I need to tell you all about something. It's still kind of hard to take in. You know, we did have to struggle for decades and decades, human rights for all kinds of people, at times when that wasn't popular in the Church. I found out about six months ago that they're doing an award for Distinguished Alumni at Austin Seminary. It feels to me like when the bad wrestler turns good, it's like at some point you don't really understand why all of a sudden. But I think it's important that this community realize that you're the reason— I would not have survived in most churches in the country. That's really important to remember. Also to remember that the people who really were the champions in the struggle didn't get to cross the finish line, a lot of them. So, I'm going to be there. This is Heather. She's right there. *[pointing her out in the sanctuary]* If people want to come to that, they have a dinner and this thing, it's still taking shape. But if after church you're interested in that, maybe give her your information.

Well, I made it until Friday thinking that this wasn't going to be a political sermon. *[laughter]* I was really, kind of, blissful about it. A series on the poetry of Genesis. The Genesis story, the fall, Adam, Eve, the snake, the tree. I'm hoping it'll be a fun series. But then, Friday, I think it was, I get a text from Erica saying, “Well, I guess you know what you're going to preach on now.” Uh-oh, better check the news.

It's just another one of those things where it's not a surprise, but there's just this dull ache and pain at some point. After murdering Venezuelans in boats. They think they're from Venezuela, but there's not enough evidence to know for sure. They were accused by the President of being narco-terrorists. Which isn't exactly a legal definition. I knew when we started using the word 'terrorist,' that that was going to mean a non-American who's inconvenient. So we bombed Venezuela, we abducted the President and his wife, and that's going to be at the back of my mind.

Now, what does that have to do with Genesis? *[laughter]* That's going to be the interesting part. I think I can pull it off, but we'll see. You'll be the judge of that; we'll do little cards at the end. *[laughter]*

One good thing I can say about our President is after he names everything after himself, we'll only have to know one word. That's exciting. Just know the word 'Trump,' and that'll be all the buildings, all the bridges, everything. Too soon? *[laughter]*.

But this is what Donald Trump said. The majority party in this country has decided that *America First* now includes the hemisphere. I hope you know the history of evil that they don't want you to know, of American imperialism. Maybe you know why they don't want you to know the history, but Donald Trump said,

We're going to get the oil flowing the way it should be. We'll be selling large amounts of oil. We'll be selling their oil to many other countries," blah, blah, blah. *"We're going to have very large United States oil companies, the biggest anywhere in the world, go in, spend billions of dollars, fix the badly broken infrastructure, the oil.*

Now, for 40 years, I've tried to implore, to realize that this is where capitalism goes. The most lucrative business in history is war. And so free markets will seek out violence, war, enslavement, worker exploitation, like a tick to blood.

Maduro was a very problematic leader. There's no question. But the process is important in a democratic country, or even a decent country. We didn't firebomb Chicago because Al Capone was there. In this country, we used to have a thing, I'm trying to remember what it was called. Oh, yeah, the Constitution. *[laughter]* We used to have a thing called the Constitution. I don't know if anybody remembers that at all. *[laughter]* Who declares war, foreign entanglements, not taking money from foreign sources.

When you look at the countries we have bombed since World War II, almost all of them are people of color. Now, think about that for a moment. Who is Trump trying to keep out of the country? If we bombed a boat full of Swedish stewardesses, I think people would respond to the humanity of it. You and I need to be the ones that help our friends and family feel the pain at the risk of alienating them. Unity doesn't come from being polite. Unity comes from virtues.

Mark Twain loved the country. But he hated American imperialism. He wrote this. He said, *America cannot have an empire abroad and a Republic at home.* Does that make sense? If we're a military juggernaut overseas, you can't have democracy at home. It's not going to happen.

Then he said – back in this day, it was like the Philippines. But we've slaughtered people of color since the very beginning. He said,

We've gone there to conquer. – talking about the Philippines, I think. We've gone there to conquer, not to redeem. And so I'm anti-imperialist. I'm opposed to having the ego put its talons in the other land.

As a Christian, you were called not to put America first. If you put America first, you've renounced Jesus Christ. You are a citizen of the world if you're following Jesus. And every human being gets the same rights, including conservatives. We have the same compassion for the basic human rights of a conservative as for anybody else. But nobody's putting conservatives in cages. Nobody's telling conservatives they can't get married because they don't have the stamp of the Church.

Genesis. Okay, let's talk about that for a second. *[laughter]* Because the Church wanted to focus on moralism instead of ethics, the idea of the fall is very misunderstood. As we look at Genesis, what we're going to be doing is a deep dive into the human psyche. That's what great literature is. That's what the ancient wisdom traditions were about. When you read Genesis or you read the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Iliad, you have that same haunting question, what does it mean to be a human being?

Does anybody here know who Chris Hedges is? Some of you? He was a reporter with the New York Times, got very alienated by what we were doing, and he was seeing firsthand. But then he went to seminary. He spoke at this church one time, and I went to dinner with him and a classics professor from UT. And they used the classics to interpret the political situation. They used the classics as the great themes of humanity, they get repeated over and over again. So if you've asked in despair, why does this keep happening? Books like Genesis are asking that question, too. What is it about humanity that makes us fall into these same routines?

Genesis is mythological. You know this, first of all, because some of the stories were in earlier religions, but also because it starts with two contradictory versions of creation. There are two stories of creation. If you're just memorizing Bible verses, you'll never see that. To be a literalist means to lose the theme, to lose the plot line.

In that culture, they lived in the desert. Time was the number one coordinate in their life, the stars, the seasons, because their life spatially, it didn't change that much. So stopping every seventh day was a way to align them. Remember, they had a lunar calendar. They were aligning themselves to nature by stopping every seven days.

I hear these great wisdom cultures calling us to listen to nature in a different way, to not judge it by the appearances. We could look at clouds and see patterns. But those are not the patterns that make up our life. They're creative principles of living being, of the physical world, of chemicals, of minerals, of elements. Genesis is a story – one story. When Karen Armstrong translates “In the beginning,” she says it doesn't have a definitive article, so it's “In *a* beginning.” In other words, sort of like, “Once upon a time.” You hear that differently.

My favorite summary of the Genesis myth, I don't know if it was unconscious or not, but Joni Mitchell's version of Woodstock, where she said,

We're stardust. We're golden. We are billion-year-old carbon. We're lost in the devil's bargain, and we have to find our way back to the garden.

We are primates who left our environment. Think about that for a moment. That means our instincts mislead us all the time. In the ancient world, they knew there was something wrong. There was something clouding their minds, and the way that was theorized was original sin. But it wasn't trying to shame people. It was trying to help people realize, why do we keep doing the same things? Why do I try not to fight with you and then fall into that against my will? What is happening within us that makes that happen? In the ancient world, they talked about a fall. Again, the point was not to shame anybody.

Carl Jung, the psychologist, believed that the fall was human consciousness, that we became conscious of ourselves as separate beings. We fell out of the web of life. Now, we can get back in it, but it has to be intentional, to do that. I think that's a lot of what religion needs to be, to rebuild that bridge. Because our instincts are going to kill us. They're certainly killing other people. But the people that will kill your enemies, for lack of principle, will also kill you. The principles that justify Donald Trump murdering people from Venezuela will be used by other cultures to murder Americans, and we'll have no excuse, no defense. We have to get back to the core virtues of our own humanity.

There's a song that *Aerosmith* did. It says, "*There's something wrong with the world today. Don't know what it is. Something in our eyes.*" That's what the Genesis myth is trying to put us in touch with. We can't trust our own judgment. The reason Jesus drilled on forgiveness and not judging other people all the time is because we can't do it. We don't have objectivity. We're mammals, and we get scared. Or we get ornery, and we objectify each other.

Jesus is saying, even if you feel like that, even if your instincts tell you that, choose wholeness. Choose humanity as your family, not as an obstacle. And Genesis goes through – it starts off in a garden. Then one of the two brothers takes up agriculture, the first part of the fall. Not that there's anything wrong with agriculture per se, but once you have that routine, you're not in nature anymore. Once you start piling up crops, you've got to protect them. And once you have to protect them, you need an army. You need these cities, fortifications. And then you need a king. And in Genesis and Exodus, that's seen as a terrible mistake, a falling away from who we are as humanity.

And comically, the last warning in this story is, don't make a temple. They're saying, "*We need to build a house for God,*" and God says, "*I don't need a house. I've lived in a tent all this time. I'm fine.*" [laughter] Now, there's nothing wrong with those things per se. None of us wants to go live in the jungle. I don't anyway. I wouldn't last four minutes. But I've got to shift the gravity of my life towards nature, towards simplicity, in order just to get my own heart back.

The last thing I want to point out, that's the most important part of this, is the point isn't to shame us. The point is to remind us there's a way home. There's a way back to the garden if we'll make that decision.

To me, religion is tuning our heart to the cosmos. It was Joseph Campbell who said,
The goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, to match your nature with nature.

So when you read Genesis, it's like the song children sing when they're doing jump rope. They're trying to find the pulse of their lives and to align the pulse that's under their skin with the pulse they see around them of the seasons.

If I had to choose one favorite hymn, it would be *Morning Has Broken*. I think it summarized Genesis better than I ever could. That's Joni Mitchell, number one. Cat Stevens, number two. [laughter] I'm aiming at number three. Here it is.

Morning has broken like the first morning. What that's saying is, Genesis is not talking about the past. It's trying to say the morning that you are going to leave this place to go into, is the same creative principle that started everything in the first place. Every day can be understood as fresh, no matter what's happened in your own story.

Blackbird has spoken like the first bird. Praise for the singing, praise for the morning, praise for them springing fresh from the word. In primitive cultures, the idea that it's spoken into being, there are principles of physics, the principles of biology. That's the Word, not the Bible. The Bible is not the Word of God. The Bible is a witness to, one of the witnesses to, the Word of God. Your life is a result of this creative principle. Then it says,

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning, born of the one light, Eden saw play. That idea that this belongs to you, that you're not an alien, that it may feel like that at times, but your life is a sacred symphony if you'll listen for it.

So I'm going to let you be the judge whether Genesis and Venezuela [laughter] are bridged. I think our problems come from alienation, from our own humanity, from nature, from life. I think Genesis is trying to show us the way back. First, it takes us into a deep tunnel where we experience parts of the human heart we don't necessarily want to see. The horrible things that you see in the Bible are not necessarily advice. You need to know that if you go deep enough, there's a Trump in there. Right? You're not a different species. You're seeing a very regressed form of your own heart. If you know that, it's much easier to respond and not be triggered. Then you feel sad. You're obviously motivated to protect other people from this pathetic soul, but not despair.

Then most importantly, it points the way home. We are stardust. We are golden. We're a billion-year-old carbon, but we're lost in the devil's bargain, and we've got to find our way back to the garden.

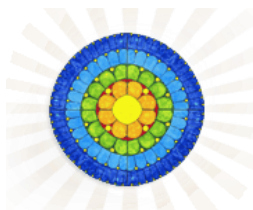
Thank you for your kind attention.

Benediction

Rev. Erica Knisely

As followers of Christ, we are called to be citizens, not of one nation, but of the whole world. May we remember our home in the garden and find our way back to fullness of life together. Now go with peace, heart and mind, to sow love into our weary world. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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