

Sermon Transcript from February 14th, 2016

Creation: The Kingdom Begins

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Great. Now that we've got that out of the way, open your Bible's and move just beyond the table of contents to where the story begins in Genesis 1. I have of course, in keeping with a great emphasis of all that we've discussed over the last few weeks, referred to the Bible as a story. Beginning in January, we posited several important questions at the outset of our year with the Bible. We asked why the Bible, what is the Bible, what's it for, where did it come from and, finally, how do we read it? But, now that we've begun to wrap our minds around those questions, we can begin to draw our focus to the actual Scriptures themselves.

So, if you're just jumping in, go back and listen to the podcast. It's really great. Specifically, we're going to start looking and thinking about the story of the Bible. After all, that's exactly what this library that we call the Bible is. It's a story. The Bible is a library of writings, that are both human and divine in origin, that together tell a unified story that leads us to Jesus. So, for the next six weeks, we want to divide that narrative flow into six chapters, if you will.

The first chapter that we're beginning tonight is "Creation: The Kingdom Begins." After that is "The Fall: The Kingdom Rebels Against The King" followed by chapter three, "Israel: The Kingdom Begins Again." Chapter four is "Jesus: The King Comes With His Kingdom." Chapter five is "The Church: The Kingdom Spreads to the World." And, the grand finale is "New Creation: The King Comes Back to Rule Forever."

So, tonight, we want to begin to explore the story of God precisely where the Bible begins, which is with God. Every good story has a hero or a heroine and, in the story of the Bible, God is the hero. So, look down at Genesis 1:1.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Okay. Stop. Before we get at everything that follows, I want us to think about those first four words. "In the beginning God." This declaration, with no introduction, no argument for God's existence, it's the stage for all that follows. These four words open up limitless possibilities about the nature of reality and the universe, and they also tell us that this is God's story.

I mention this because you and I both know that to discuss what unfolds in the first two chapters of Genesis necessitates that we navigate treacherous waters. I suppose it goes without saying that the author of Genesis intends to communicate a great deal with the story of creation. But, what often surprises many modern sensibilities, is learning what the creation story is not attempting to communicate. If you didn't get to attend Tim Mackie's midweek lecture a couple of weeks ago on the Bible's creation narrative, please go back and listen to the podcast. It's about almost two hours of mind-blowing goodness. Tremendously helpful. But, for our purposes tonight, let me just condense a little bit of what Tim was getting at.

So, when I was a kid, I was obsessed with dinosaurs. Not just like I like the toys and coloring books. Like, I was obsessed with learning everything that I could about the Mesozoic Era, learning about the cranial ridge of a pachycephalosaurus and how his spine lines up like a battering ram, and the hooting noise that paleontologists think a parasaurolophus might have made. I read any book that I could track with as a kid. I watched every documentary that came on TV. This was the 80s so all the paleontology has been widely discredited since then. But, it was still great. It took me a while to accept the feathers but, once I got over the feathers, I was okay.

To my childhood mind, I was frustrated when I would see a lunchbox that had a tyrannosaurus and a stegosaurus together. I'd be like, "What the heck? They were separated by 100 million years. They can't be on the same lunchbox."

But, I also went to Sunday school as a kid and I read the story that we're reading tonight. It never occurred to me back then that the two stories were in tension with one another because I didn't assume that the Bible's creation narrative was a scientific history of the universe, and I didn't assume that my dinosaur books were meant to tell me the history of Israel's God.

Now, I have a son. He's two years old now and he loves dinosaurs. He really really loves dinosaurs. It turns out indoctrination works really well. So, get this. Here's a photo of me. I know it's a bit blurry, but this is my award-winning social science fair projects. "How Has Special Effects Changed in the Movies."

If you'll see at the – what? We can't even get through the photo without laughing? Hold on. At the bottom of the photo is the crown jewel of Jurassic Park's action figure line in 1993. That's the tyrannosaurus. It was like Tickle Me Elmo. Is that too old for you too? It was like, I don't know, Furby? Whatever. You can't find it anywhere is what I'm getting at. It was wonderful. It was a great achievement in my life to get this.

Now, here's a photo of my son with the exact same tyrannosaurus. And not just like the same toy. That's the same tyrannosaurus that I had when I was a kid shipped from a garage in Georgia all the way to Portland for his birthday, courtesy of Uncle Patrick and Aunt Vanessa. So, thank you for that. This kid can identify about eight or nine different types of dinosaurs. One of them is technically an Avian reptile, but we count it.

He watches cartoons about dinosaurs, he watches documentaries about dinosaurs, and some of them are like brutal. It turns out the Mesozoic Era was brutal. Me and Abby are always like, "Uh, should he be watching this? Go ahead. Yeah."

And he hears all this stuff about what scientists believe about dinosaurs and when they roamed the earth, and he also reads books about Jesus and how God created the universe. And he's hanging around downstairs with the kids right now. Eventually, this kid, Beck, is going to learn that the things he's reading and learning are enough to make two entire camps of people nearly foam at the mouth with rage. The conservative wing of the church that's concerned with reconciling the pachycephalosaurus with Genesis 1 and then the naturalist community that's concerned with rebutting the scientific inaccuracies in Genesis.

The thing is, both parties are imposing their own expectations on the text. This is a huge shame because it's clouded our ability to read the text for what it actually is. Tim Mackie kind of described it as a guy who need to learn magic tricks for a kid's birthday party so he goes out and buys a copy of Harry Potter. If you read Hebrew Bible scholars, you'll start to pick up on this recurring motif which is we're going into the story looking for the wrong thing.

In fact, many assume that if we describe to the author of Genesis what we've done in interpreting the text, he would be like, "Aarrgghhrooo?"

I was so looking forward to that moment. I even wrote this out in my notes: "Tim Allen grunt."

Oh, stop. I appreciate it. That was generous of you. The Bible is an act of communication. Sounds obvious, but in virtually any communicative forms, most thinking people assume that we're in need of a certain amount of context or clarification. Even in the face of very basic, matter-of-fact statements. Like "too much work is bad for you."

Yeah, sure. But, what do you mean by that? What do you mean by "work"? How much is too much?

"Taylor Swift is a gifted musician."

Okay... let's define what those terms mean. I'm going to need a lot more context and clarification. Oh, did I lose you with that one? You'll be alright. She doesn't need my approval. You'll be fine.

"Donald Trump is a Christian."

Whoa. Okay. What do those words mean, because I don't understand that either? Okay, I got you back. I got you back. Maybe I won't do the Taylor Swift thing at the next one. Somewhere she's like, "A pastor has questioned my artistic integrity."

I'm just kidding. She doesn't know what that term means. Sorry, Abby. Are you listening to this podcast, John Mark? You're not going to leave another weekend, are you? Okay. All of the Bible's communication is couched in a story; it's contained in a narrative. The context of the story is everything in understanding the Scriptures. Many of us, I think at times, myself absolutely included, are unprepared for the hard work that's asked of us to

unearth the necessary context to understand the Scriptures.

Discipleship isn't a weekend retreat. It's not just a seminar. It asks not just something, but everything. Think of it a lot like marriage is a popular metaphor. Discipleship begins with a covenant from the outset and a beautiful and fun path towards increasing familiarity unfolds before us with an increasing commitment to assess and evaluate and process a new life in the context of a relationship. All that's required to be married. It takes time, it takes work, and new means of living and it's worth it.

That leads us to an awkward realization that the Bible is written for us, but it isn't written to us. We're actually reading someone else's mail. We're allowed to. It's beneficial. But, the author doesn't know us. He's addressing his audience in his culture through his language and with his concerns. Thus, to get the author's message, we have to go to the author without expecting the author to come to us. Now, we can do this, but we can't expect the author to meet us on our terms.

The fact does remain that the text is, in its way, God's message for us by the Spirit. So, it takes work and tools and resources and the entire community of God to process God's message. Now, of course, the traditional objection to this kind of emphasis on cultural context and understanding is the ever popular: "We don't need all this malarkey."

People will argue that, at this point, we are needlessly complicating the text, that we don't need all of this work and resource to understand the text and that we ought to simply read the Bible as it is, right there on the surface, just read it for what it says. And in response, Old Testament scholar, John Walton, has this to say:

"The so-called 'reading it for what it is' technique of approaching the Scriptures is actually just reading it through your own personal lenses, through your own culture, through your own issues and your own ideas. We cannot read the text without some sort of template that we're putting on it. And, if we're not thinking about that template, it will be ours by default. If the template is ours, it's not the author's. If it isn't the author's, it doesn't have authority."

So, the idea here is to approach the text with humility; with a desire to actually understand what the author has set out to communicate. Because, reading the Bible is a cross-cultural experience and it begins on the first page in the first line of the first story. So, with all that said, let's get into the text proper.

Look back at Genesis 1:1:

"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.

"And God said, 'Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.' So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault 'sky.' And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

"And God said, 'Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.' And it was so. God called the dry ground 'land,' and the gathered waters he called 'seas.' And God saw that it was good."

So, the story launches into immediate action and several themes are evident. One: God has set Himself to a creative endeavor, and the fruit of this endeavor is good. Of course, if we're honest, something else is also immediately evident, at least to us in the Western world in Portland in 2016. The author is envisioning and describing the mechanics of the universe in a way completely unlike our modern sensibilities.

In fact, if you go through Genesis and the Psalms and you add up the cosmology of the Hebrew Scriptures, you get something like this. So, there it is. Plain as day. You've got the waters above, separated by the vault. Underneath, the world is flat. Of course. And,

underneath, the world is held up by pillars and there's a cosmic, chaotic sea with the chaotic leviathan, the monster that hides in the ocean.

And the thing is this shouldn't bother us. Actually, I think it's pretty cool. I was showing this to my wife before I did the teaching and said, "Do you think that this picture's okay? It's not like the most aesthetically pleasing ever."

She said, "Well, don't make a poster of it, but sure. Hide it in the thing."

This shouldn't bother us. The Hebrew authors are actually very intelligent, but it seems like God didn't drag their scientific expertise into the 21st century. So, consider a similar example elsewhere: the Hebrew Scriptures, several times over, command us to love Yahweh with all of our minds. In ancient Hebrew, people didn't understand the physiology of the brain the way that we did, so their word for "mind" is actually "entrails," because that's where your thinking is done.

"Love Yahweh with all of your entrails." Of course, we know what they meant and your translators are doing you a big favor there. But, God doesn't revise this stuff. Any time we think the Bible is making breakthrough scientific discoveries thousands of years ahead of its time, we should watch out because that's not treating the Bible like an ancient text. The author doesn't seem as concerned with the scientific explanation for how the universe came into physical existence, so we shouldn't be concerned with imposing those expectations on his writing. Instead, let's ask what the author is communicating.

The early chapters of Genesis accurately present two accounts of cosmic and human origins in the language and ideas of the ancient Hebrews. These texts should not be removed from their ancient context and read as if they refer to the process of cosmic or human origins in the 21st century scientific terms. They speak in terms of an ancient Near Eastern perception of the world and should be interpreted within that setting. When we discern the meaning of the text in their ancient context, we find that they constitute a worldview statement about God and His relationship to the world and about humans and their relation to God and the world.

This basic worldview statement transcends its ancient cultural setting and commands the attention of God's people in all places and all times. In the first two chapters we are confronted with an unexpected story. A beautiful depiction of a creative creator God who, in the narrative, is portrayed as creating with purpose and with goodness the kind of world that we're living in. Maybe not it's physical arrangement, per se, in 21st century terms, but the kind of world and why it's here and why we're here and who God is to us and who we are to each other.

All of this is bold and evident in Genesis 1 and 2. With this in mind, think about how the story opens. Look back at verse 1 if you still have it open in front of you.

"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."

This description of formless and void is the Hebrew term "tohu va-vohu." It doesn't mean "nothing." It's a concept more like uncultivated, chaotic wilderness. So, in the story a very long time ago, God finds the world in a chaotic wilderness state. And Genesis 1 is about God architecting a world of meaning and purpose out of a wasteland. It isn't actually a story about God bringing something into physical existence before there was nothing. That's a modern conception. It's about bringing chaos into order.

In fact, the entire story plays a bit like being dropped into a story in progress. Why the chaos? Why is it formless and void? What happened? As the story unfolds, we'll learn of a great battle that has already taken place prior to Genesis 1 and we'll learn about an evil murderer that is already on the loose in the chaotic wilderness prior to Genesis 1. Gerry Breshears describes it a bit like being dropped into the first moments of a Star Wars story. The film opens, you're dropped into the aftermath of a battle in progress and you're introduced to key players. But, you won't know until later the scope of that battle and its full ramifications. All we have right now is this opening scene.

God is creatively ordering the cosmos and the goodness of His work is evident. This idea of goodness was terribly revolutionary when the Bible was being written and collected. Just look at the motif goodness, if you can try to follow along with me, beginning in

verse 9.

Genesis 1:9, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place," and then just a few lines later, God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:11, "Let the land produce vegetation," just a bit later, God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:14, "Let there be lights." God saw it was good.

Genesis 1:20, "Let the water teem with living creatures." God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:24, "Let the land produce living creatures." And God saw that it was good.

And finally, in Genesis 1:31, this beautiful statement: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

As modern westerners, many of us take the idea of a good world, in some sense, and equality amongst humanity as a given. But, in the ancient Near East, this was a unique perspective. In alternate Near Eastern creation narratives from around the time of Genesis, the good world we know does not unfold from the loving kindness of a relational God. Here's one example: In the ancient Babylonian text, the Enuma Elish, the story of cosmic formation also begins with watery chaos, just like in Genesis. And it unfolds in six days or scenes, just like in Genesis. And it culminates in the creation of humankind on the sixth day, just like in Genesis.

But, unlike Genesis, the Enuma Elish depicts a world forged in the gore of a blood soaked battlefield. That's not an exaggeration. The world is actually pieced together from the dismembered corpses of the gods. It doesn't seem practical to me, but I'm not Babylonian. Maybe I would understand it if I was.

And, by the way, this is just on the side. I feel like this is important to do the Lord's work tonight. You'll notice back there I said the world is "actually" pieced together rather than the word "literally." I think that most of the time, when we as humans use the word "literally," what we mean is something like "actually" or, nine times out of ten, the word "figuratively," which is the opposite of the word "literally."

So, this is just a personal recommendation from your friend Josh: next time you're hanging out with friends, you're at a party or something and you feel inclined to say "literally," say "figuratively." I guarantee it will be correct. Say "figuratively." Just try it out. You might not like it, but try it a few times and maybe it will fit and we'll all speak better English.

Anyway, so when humanity is finally introduced in the Enuma Elish, it's basically an afterthought. It's like they are the granted request of this god called "Marduk" who thinks that it's unfair that god should have to serve other gods, so he creates people so that they can act as slaves to the gods. And the Enuma Elish is one example of many ancient Near Eastern creation myths that are just like it. The basic message is the origin of the world is brutal, the world itself is brutal and you are a slave to the gods in your short, brutal life.

But, in Genesis, the world is woven together as a gracious endeavor at the hands of a kind creator God and the world doesn't begin brutal, it actually begins good. And, as we'll see in a moment, humans aren't created as God's slaves, they're created as His partners. So, let's get back to the story to see how that happens.

So thus far, God's good world is populated by plants and animals and birds and fish. All things that are good, but there's more. Skip down to verse 26 of the first chapter.

Genesis 1:26, "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'

"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living

creature that moves on the ground."

This is the story of the beginnings of humankind, and in it, the God who created everything is beginning the story of humanity. Genesis 1 is not primarily about the beginning of the universe or the planet or life. It's the story of humankind. God is preparing a beautiful place in which He might dwell with those who are made in His image. Together, they will shalom the planet. What does that mean and why is the planet in need of "shaloming?" More on that in just a bit.

But, if humanity is central to the creation narrative, something becomes evident as we work to understand the beginning of the story of God. Mike Erre puts it this way:

"We think of the Bible as a record of humanity's search for God, but the truth is precisely the opposite. It's a record of His pursuit of us. The Bible begins and ends with God. He is at the center of the universe, we are not. This is His story and our stories find their proper place in His."

In Genesis 1 and 2, we are God's covenant partners. Humanity is in relationship with the protagonist, with the hero of the story. But, what Mike Erre is getting at is important. Our stories find their proper place in His. It seems to me that many well seasoned in the culture of the church have experienced the Christian tendency to sort of shoehorn ourselves into every line of Scripture that we enjoy wearing like some outfit during the course of our infrequent time with the Bible, you know? You read something, it sounds nice, you're like, "Hey, that must be about me. Sounds nice."

"For I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord."

Oh, man. Written just for me. Isn't that thoughtful? That's so nice. But, get this and listen to this, because I think that this is kind of important for us. As a reaction to this, some of us have begun to read ourselves out of the story entirely because we think, "Oh, this is ancient. This is antiquated. It was written at a time and place altogether alien to me."

Which is all true, but then we conclude, "Therefore, it has nothing to do with me at all."

While it's true that the Bible is God's story, it's also true that our stories find their place in God's story. So, to understand this, we need to frame our reading of Scripture, not by trying to fit Scripture into our own lives, but by seeing our lives in the story of the Scriptures. God creates, not because He needs to nor on compulsion of boredom, nor the fumbling of an accident. The story of the Scriptures reveals with beautiful clarity that the one and true creator God creates from an overflow of love and of joy and kindness, the things that permeate and characterize His entire relational being.

In Genesis 1, God sets to work curating order and purpose in the cosmos. And, fascinatingly, this newly formed order is not static. God's creation is not meant to be like a painting in a frame. Built into the fabric of creation are possibilities. There are seeds that can become plants and fruit that can become more fruit, animals that can make more animals, and later, humans who can make more humans and, get this, humans that can make choices. So, the central features of the creation story are crucial because, in them, we discover God's original intent for creation. [26:48]

This is called "foreshadowing" or a literary technic called "Chekhov's Gun." Chekhov's Gun is a dramatic principle that was proposed by an author, Anton Chekhov, that basically requires that every element of a story be irreplaceable. It's often put like this:

"Remove everything that has no relevance to the actual story."

So, if you say in the first chapter of a story that there's a rifle hanging on the wall, then by chapter three or four, it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, then don't have it hanging on the wall. So, in Genesis 1, we're introduced to a people and a world that are significant to the story. They're specially designed to fulfill God's purpose and the implications and the possibilities are massive.

What are these characters doing there? Where are they going? Can humanity dwell here forever? Seems like a lot of pages to dedicate to gardening, if that's the case. If

not, how will God move His clear agenda forward? Because He has a purpose and it's declared with certainty. How will humanity play a role?

These are the bits of foreshadowing that are colliding with our lives in the present, because everything up to now is a story and everything after now is a story. And as we've seen in this story, the narrative repeatedly declares that God likes what He's made. It is, in God's own estimation, good. Simple enough. Only we know now a pervasive aversion to God's direct declaration of goodness has permeated the Church and our culture at large.

According to many, physical is bad and spiritual is good. While that logic syncs up quite nicely with platonic philosophy, it runs in direct defiance against the opening of the Biblical story. God likes what He's made. In fact, He went out of His way to create a physical world. Before any trace of corruption has tainted God's work of art, God calls it "good." Creation is a work that reveals and reflects God's goodness and His order and His intelligence. It is, by necessity, a good thing.

Mike Erre also had this to say in his book "Why We Need the Bible:"

"Have a body is a good thing. Needing food and drink and air and love, all of this is good. Our material existence is and always has been good. The material world is not inferior to or somehow less spiritual than the rest of our existence."

Now, in the story, by the time we get to verse 26 as God sets out to create humanity, we read God referring to Himself in the plural, which is kind of weird. He says, "Let us make mankind in our image."

Some scholars, I'm sure you guys have heard about this, speculate that maybe God's referring to a heavenly court of angels or messengers. Or maybe this is a very early, beautiful hint at the threefold nature of God, what in theology is called "the Trinity." Either way, whichever one is right. As the story begins, we learn that God is doing something relational. His creative activity is relational. This "we" work that God is about is creating humanity in His image or in His likeness.

He designs plants and animals according to their kind, we read in the story, but He designs humans according to His kind. And when the second chapter of Genesis begins, the author zeroes in on two particular human characters. The first the author calls "the man," or, more literally, the "adam."

So, look over at Genesis 2, beginning in verse 15.

Genesis 2:15, "**The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.**"

Skip over to verse 18.

Genesis 2:18, "**The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'**"

The word "adam" in Hebrew is a word that means "humanity," basically. And, like all names in the Old Testament, both "adam" and "eve" have a very specific meaning and purpose. So, the Israelite author who wrote Genesis named Adam "adam," or "human." And her name is "Eve," which means "life."

Adam and Eve. Human. Life. Man and woman. The first chapter of Genesis centers on the creative ordering of a garden and chapter two focuses on the relationship between the man and the woman who live there. Now, up to this point in the story, everything has been good by God's own declaration. The first instance of something not being good arrives in Genesis 2:18. "**The Lord God said, 'It's not good for the man to be alone.'**"

So, it's interesting that, prior to the fall, what we're going to talk about next week, in a time and place that many assume, for some reason, was created perfect, God identifies something as "not good." This is the first insufficient starting point prior to the entrance of human evil in the story. Man is created with a certain sense of loneliness that God intends to fulfill with relationships, both human and divine. We are designed incomplete without relationships, without friendships or community or family or romance or love and affection and connection with other people and with God Himself.

And, of course, like our commission to rule over the earth with loving goodness, this "not goodness" of loneliness carries on to this very day. It's still not good for human beings to be alone. None of us can be fully human on our own. We are always intended for a variety of relationships. Rightly ordered relationships resolve the "not good" in man's loneliness.

So, consequently, here in the story, God crafts a woman to solve man's loneliness, and she's described as a helper, but don't let the translation irk you. It's actually a beautiful way of describing her. Elsewhere in the Scriptures, the same exact word, I'm sure you guys have heard, is used to describe God Himself as a helper. I think it's lovely.

Now I want you to notice something else wonderful about the story. In the narrative, God is depicted as this fantastic, powerful, creator of all things, and He's depicted as this relational being who interacts with His creation in a display of intimacy. He's not content to sort of create and then withdraw from the scene. He's inclined to interact with and to know His people and to know the world that is developing upon His command.

Humanity alone shares God's image or God's likeness, and especially in one important way. In the ancient Near East, kings and rulers would often place sculptures or engravings of themselves in distant territories of the kingdom as sort of a visual signifies of the king's expansive dominion over the entire land. But, in this way, humanity bears God's image or likeness as an indication of His kingship. And the way humanity flourishes that continue to extend God's collaborative rule over the earth as the human project flourishes.

God's invitation is to develop the possibilities that are nestled within earth's raw materials in ways that reflect God's creative goodness. So thus, humanities dominion over the earth is designed to parallel God's rule over humanity. God Himself has entrusted to humanity, to us, the land and the water and the air and the plants and the animals and, indeed, the earth's natural resources in full.

In doing so, God tasks His people to be like Him in order to "shalom" the planet. Cornelius Plantinga describes that concept like this:

"The webbing together of God, humans and all creation in justice, fulfillment and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call 'shalom.' In the Bible, 'shalom' means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight."

Gerry Breshears calls "shalom" a community where all relationships with God, others, self and the rest of creation are all well ordered and flourishing as God designed it. So, hear me on this. This is an essential part of our humanity. This is not an unachievable ideal that we have relinquished at the advent of human evil. Braided throughout humanities collected DNA is the appointment to steward and care for creation in such a way that God's own concern for creation is well represented amongst His image bearers.

This God given appointment precedes the fall, meaning it's very much an aspect of our original design. The command to rule over and to develop the world, what in theology is called "the cultural mandate." It reminds us the world was not a static thing. It was not created complete and intended to stay that way. Instead, the world was and still is going somewhere. And our identity, as those who bear God's image, includes the assignment to ensure the world is directed toward a God-honoring and beneficial goal.

Our role as stewards also carries a great range of freedom and autonomy as we fulfill that responsibility. Everything in humanities great potential is to be brought under the realm and rule of God. Art and business and relationships. When we paint or compose or buy or sell or love, we do so as God's image bearers and as rulers in His created order. And we've been given a moral and intellectual and emotional and relational capacity to fulfill God's calling to rule over the world.

When humans steward God's creation effectively, it should advance God's reputation. When art and business and even environmental concern are done effectively, God's reputation should be advanced. And this sounds well enough on paper or in a sermon, I suppose, but begin to explore the possible ramifications of what that means for us and watch the way that those around you draw into their shells like frightened turtles or splay themselves out in an angry, defensive posture like a frightened... peacock? That works.

What does it mean – this is what I'm getting at – to rule and reign over creation as a

reflection of God's goodness? Does that mean that God is concerned with the way that humanity destroys the planet with pollutants, for example? Does that mean that God approves of or looks down on a factory farm and approves of hundreds of thousands of animals born into a living Hell of nightmare suffering for the sake of a hamburger or a jacket? Does that advance God's reputation? Does that reflect the kind of gracious and loving king that God is?

Or, do some things that humanity has done with creation represent humanity's lost vision to rule and reign over the earth as God intended and, if I may, does it represent the same forgetfulness amongst God's own people?

In the book that I was telling you guys about, "The Mission of God's People," Christopher Wright says this:

"The trouble is that some Christians seem to have Bibles that begin at Genesis 3 and end at Revelation 20. They know all about sin from the story of the fall and they know that God has solved the sin problem through Christ and that they will be safe on the great day of judgment. The story of creation, for them, is no more than a backdrop for the story of salvation. And the Bible's grand climax speaks to them only of going to heaven when they die even though the last chapters of the Bible say nothing about us going anywhere, but eagerly anticipating God coming here."

We were created as humans before we became disciples of Jesus, and we don't cease to be humans post-discipleship. And God will hold us accountable for our humanity as much as for our Christianity. There are things that we have been commanded by God to do as human creatures from which no other Bible text or teaching exempts us. On the contrary, being God's people and therefore already amongst the newly redeemed humanity, surely reinforces and intensifies our obligation to live by His original mandate to the human race. Ruling and serving creation is humanity's first mission on earth, and God has never repealed that mandate.

The Old Testament specifically includes creation within its vision of God's redemptive plans. This is a theme that will echo again and again in the chapters and stories to come. And the vision to redeem creation is never portrayed as one that involved whisking the nations of humanity off the planet to some other, better place. This is a redemptive plan for people with and within creation, and it is a plan for creation itself.

In Romans, Paul describes the entire creation as groaning in anticipation for a coming day when Jesus the King will restore and redeem everything. And this future reality should shape our thinking in the present. God's redemptive mission includes creation. Our mission involves participating in that redemptive work as agents of good news to creation as well as to people. And that good news has extended to and affected many of us. But, of course, at this point we're getting ahead of ourselves because this is only the beginning of the story.

A well worn trope of hero-centric storytelling is the character arch. I'm sure you guys know all about it. It's the term that refers to the inner-journey or transformation of a given character over the course of his or her story. The story's drama is born from situating a character or characters in the face of opposition and, in doing so, the author draws concern and empathy from an audience. In archetypical fiction, the hero often overcomes said odds and the world of the story is changed because of it, and this is called an "arch."

Now, I don't believe personally in using specifics from art and entertainment for the purposes of Bible teachings, because they're riddled with spoilers. There's no way around being disrespectful to movies by using them. But, if you're curious about what actually constitutes a spoiler, I define it as any and all details or information about what transpires within a given story, production or runtime. Think about that the next time you are around me and talking about anything you've ever seen or read.

Of course they range from mild to major, but they're all spoilers. And pastors, they just don't seem to care about this. Every time someone comes around they're like, "Oh, and then this is what happens at the end of the movie and that's what God is like," I'm more like, "What are you doing? What are you doing to us? Give us a chance to see it. There's no expiration date on these things."

I quoted Mike Erre twice tonight, but the last time Mike Erre was here, the entire thrust of his teaching was basically telling the entire movie of Saving Private Ryan. I was like, "What are you doing? Why would you do that to us? It hasn't been that long."

Sorry. Tangent. In the art and craft of storytelling, conflict and drama are buoyed up on the back of an origin story, basically. A beginning or a source. If you don't know anything about Marty McFly or John McClain or Sarah Connor or Rocky Balboa or Harry Potter, if you don't know anything about where they began or how the story started, then any ensuing conflict or drama comes up empty because it's a conflict void of the audience's compassion or concern.

And the beginning of our story is of a good world and it's still good, but it's not all good anymore. The whole of humanity, including you and I, have contributed directly to its ruins. So, what does that mean for us tonight? How do we not simply know, but participate in the story of God? I have three considerations for us before we end tonight.

The first is that God's world is good. The opening scene of the Biblical narrative reveals the unfolding of a good and beautiful world. And though the world is wounded, absolutely, it is still good and we're still here. In fact, and I'm violating my own spoiler rule here about the Bible, the Bible ends not up in the clouds, but here on earth in this world. And our lives are here, our future is here, our concern is for here, our mission is for here and our focus should be here. We aren't anxiously awaiting some great escape, we're participating in a new creation in the here and now and we're anxiously awaiting the day when that redemptive work will cover the entire cosmos at the return of King Jesus.

What you do here and now matters. The earthly stuff matters. And that's my second point. God is concerned about the kind of work you do vocationally, for instance. We talk about this a ton at Bridgetown. Whether you're a teacher or an ecologist or a mom or a dad or an artist or whatever you might be, God is concerned with the way that you relate to creation. From the way that you care for the marginalized and the oppressed, all the way that you care for the ozone and the animal kingdom. It matters, actually. This is the cultural mandate to rule and to reign over creation, and it has not been revoked.

And finally, we were made to go about this great endeavor to "shalom" the planet in the context of relationships with other human beings. Not simply a curated friend list of people with the same haircut and the same taste in music or whatever it might be, but an entire human family united by God's fatherhood and a shared call to care for God's good world and to share His story.

And this is a subversive story. Portland, for example, knows environmental responsibility well, and that's great. But, our concern for the environment is more than a civic duty, you know? It's a loving and gracious command of God our Father. This story that we're talking about tonight, it subverts the well known railing against the inherent awfulness of the world. The old whimpering for a doomed planet in a hope for a better future out in the clouds. This story says, "No. This world is good. It's just broken. And God hasn't given up on it and neither will we."

We're still God's people, still mandated for stewardship of the world awaiting renewal. And this is why we, as a church here at Bridgetown and in Van City in Vancouver, this is why we're concerned with mission. To see God's story told to those yet to hear it and to know it. To do justice and renewal in our cities and around the world. This is why we emphasize community so much. Not just a party on a Sunday with songs and some guy rambling at you for 45 minutes, but to live shoulder to shoulder with those in the trenches of God's good mission, sharing life and relationships.

This isn't just abstract theory; this is actually what we're trying to do here. Not perfect, but this is what we're trying to do. And this story and its beginning remind us of who we were meant to be and who we still are and who God has invited us to become. It reminds us of where we're going. It acts as a signpost pointing us forward towards a great future and a redeemed cosmos, and it is a story that begins and ends with creation. Let's pray.