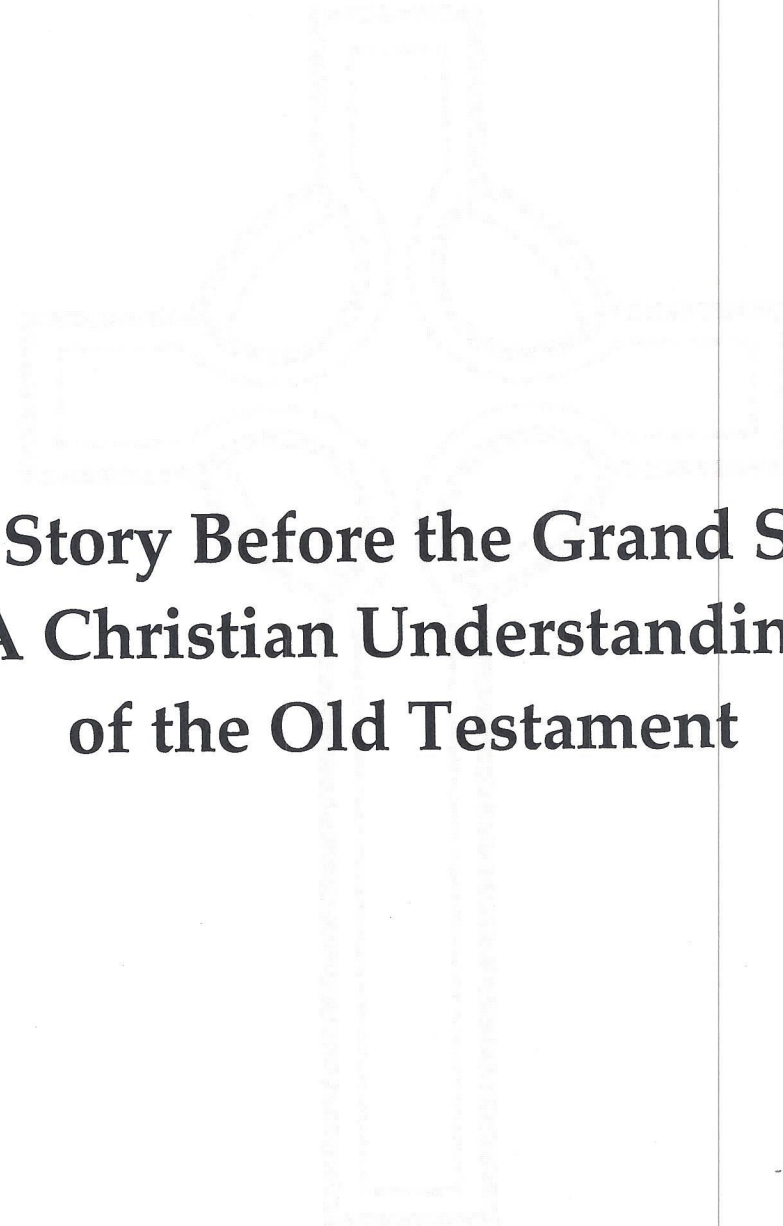


THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



**The Story Before the Grand Story:
A Christian Understanding
of the Old Testament**

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At the Beginning

Genesis 1:1-25

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In the Bible there are two books that begin with these words, “In the beginning God spoke.” The most famous is the book of Genesis. In the beginning God said, let there be light, he spoke first and then creation happened. He made himself known, he communicated. He communicated his awareness. In fact, Psalm 8, the great psalm of creation says, “What is man that Thou art mindful of him.” God is mindful of what he created. He spoke, and out of that speech came all that exists. The other great book is John’s gospel. John begins his gospel in the same way. “In the beginning was the word.” John Calvin translates John 1:1 “In the beginning was the speech.”¹ The Greek word *logos* is used, but it’s the Hebrew word of *genesis*, that John has in mind. God spoke at the beginning. He communicated, he decided, he made his will known. “In the beginning was the Word, the Word is with God, the Word was God. All things were made by him.”

Soon we discover that the Eternal Word is Jesus Christ: John puts it this way. “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” Jesus Christ is not a part of creation. Jesus Christ was with the Father in the beginning, and through him creation occurred.

So, in the beginning was the speech, and the speech was with God, and all things were made through him. Sounds just like Genesis, doesn’t it? “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have beheld his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Two speeches then in John. The first speech tells of the doctrine of creation. The second speech tells of the coming of Jesus Christ, the Lord of creation who conquers death and sin, the power of evil, who makes us into a new creation. That is the story that John will unfold in his gospel. Two great speeches of God tell the story.

Between the two speeches is a journey, a journey which we call the Old Testament. The first books of the Old Testament are the books of Moses and that would be written about 1,250 years before Christ. But the story begins six hundred years before Moses with the people that are chosen and their father is Abraham. Most of the Old Testament is a journey that travels all the way in and through the story of real people who live in a real place alongside the Mediterranean Sea. That first story, beginning in Genesis, and going through the Old Testament narratives, prepares us for the second speech, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, which we celebrate in Advent.

Those of us who know the boy Jesus born on Christmas Day, need also to know the first part of the story so that we may really understand the second part. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge, "I've been reading the Old Testament a lot recently." And he said it was important for him to read the Old Testament. "As a matter of fact, we cannot hear the last word until we've heard the next to the last word."² We who live in our century need to read the next to the last word to understand the last word. We need to journey from the doctrine of creation into the doctrine of redemption, and of the fulfillment that we have in Christ, and that's what we're going to do in these next few weeks. I've entitled this series of sermons "The Story Before the Grand Story." We're going to look at that story and watch it unfold through the eyes of the New Testament faith.

It begins in Genesis 1. God speaks first. Information is at the beginning, communication is at the beginning. You know what's ironic in a way? Present day scientists who study quantum physics have come to that very point because of recent evidence. A physicist friend of mine was sharing with me this summer a baffling fact that modern nuclear physicists are working with, and that is that electrons can communicate with each other at vast distances, and perhaps even beyond the speed of light. We thought the speed of light

was the absolute high speed of all creation, yet electrons communicate with each other beyond distances that are unimaginable, perhaps at speeds beyond the speed of light. Therefore the information and the transfer of information may in fact be the most fundamental reality of nuclear physics.

We heard it first in Genesis. Information precedes mass and energy. In the beginning God spoke, "And there was light." He spoke, he communicated and spoke first, not only that but God is mindful of what he creates. So we have the Genesis narrative which is portrayed for us in epic terms of six days of creation. Those days should not be seen as six chronological 24 hour periods because the word day is used here, just as the word "day" is sometimes used in the other parts of the Bible when we hear about the Day of the Lord, and the sense of day as seen like a day with God which is a thousand elsewhere. I believe each day is portrayed here in Genesis in that same epic sense.

It's put in terms of six days. This means that creation has a beginning and ending. It happens in time and space. And notice after this creation of light described in day one, evening morning, and God called it good. And then the second day of creation occurs, the skies and the earth are formed. And in the third day of creation there's a further division of the water and the land. And the fourth day of creation where the seasons are created, and these he called good. In the fifth day of creation, the marvelous life of the seas are created, and at the end of that, day five is once again called good. By the way, that word "good" *tove* is the first of the love words in the Old Testament Bible. God called it good, he liked it, he loved it. And then we come to the sixth day. In the sixth day, the creeping animals of the earth, all the created order of the earth is created in the sixth day. Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind, cattle, creeping things, wild animals, and it was so. And God made the wild animals of every kind, and he saw that it was good.

At last God said, let us make Adam. Our *New RSV* text translates the word Adam by "human kind," but the Hebrew word is *Adam*, because Adam is the generic word for man. "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness, and let them," now he speaks in the plural, "have dominion." This word is the beginning of the freedom words of the Old Testament, "over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the cattle and over

every wild animal on earth, every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. And so God created Adam in his image,” his imprint is what the word means. God made us in his imprint. In the image of God he created, and now it becomes plural, again “male and female, he created them. And then he blessed them.”

And then at the end of the sixth day the text says, “And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good.” Now, it doesn’t just say *tove* but, very good, it was very good. There was evening, there was morning, day six. That’s the Genesis account of creation.

Notice that this creation narrative is not really a scientific description of how. It’s a theological description of what and who and why. It is a description about the meaning of it all, it’s a description that doesn’t really describe when or how he did it, but that he did it. It’s the ‘that’ of creation we hear affirmed in the Genesis account. It’s also the ‘who’ of creation, because the text focuses on man/woman. And then there’s one more feature in these opening verses of chapter one. It also is a portrayal of God’s opinion of what he created, his opinion of it all.

In this great epic record, four things become clear that I want to sketch in as we start this journey of the Story Before the Grand Story. Notice the four things that become clear in the Genesis account. The first thing is we meet the Creator himself, first of all, just like we did in John’s gospel. We meet the Creator first. His mindfulness, his awareness of what he makes, all that exists does not simply come from chance or come without meaning. A holy meaning is at its source.

If communication is a reality in physics it is the basic beginning point in the theology of Genesis and John. God made it, and he called it good. God announced his opinion of it. That’s the first thing, we don’t want to miss that.

Secondly, this narrative is about us, after all Moses wrote it. And so Moses has a concern to show who we are in the midst of this creation. Notice that in the narrative, we are made in the image of God, we have God’s imprint upon us and that is a great mystery, the *Imagio Deo*, the great mystery of human life, that we have the imprint of God upon us. That is not said about anything else in creation. Nothing else is spoken of as having this image of

God, the imprint of God upon it.

Blaise Pascal called this the God Sized Vacuum within us as human beings.³ We have the God sized yearning within us. Nothing else in creation has it, in that we yearn for God; and for Pascal, that is the imprint. Yet, now listen closely, though God made us within this sixth day, he does not give us a day all to ourselves; and it may turn out that we're not too happy about that, but that is another story.

We were made in the sixth day with its ending. We're put in the sixth day, we're in the day that has an ending. Within this day we have a continuity with all the rest of the creatures, the animals in the animal kingdom. We have a continuity with them, that's why it's proper and important for biology to trace that continuity that we have with the rest of the created order. We're grateful for it, you know? Because of it, a dog's heart is like a human heart. Because of that physical continuity a cardiologist/surgeon is able to insert a pig's valve from a pig's heart into your heart because we have a continuity with the created order. And that's the way God made us, that's a part of his good design, and that's in the Genesis account. We are not made in a day separate, we have the imprint of God on us, nothing else in creation has that; yet, we are in continuity with the rest of creation of the animal kingdom.

Three, we are made for relationship and that is made clear in this text, we're not to be isolated; by divine design, we're not isolated, we're not put in a day by ourselves. We're not isolated from God. God speaks to us too, we'll learn more about that in Genesis chapter 2. God made us to know him, but also he made us to know and treasure each other.

Isn't it interesting, when Adam is created, it says God created Adam, and then it immediately becomes plural: male/female, he created them. That's Adam, that's generic man, male/female. And this means that we need relationship male/female in order to discover our own uniqueness; to know who we are. That's why it's not proper for a person to say, I intend to be self-referential and within myself I'll understand who I am. I'll focus only on my own gender, my own sex. No, I can't know who I am that way. Adam saw Eve and said, "Ah, bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh." She's like me, but she's not like me. She's unique too, and both are unique, and in that complimentary relationship we discover who we are.

So, relationship becomes fundamental in this Genesis narrative. We also have a relationship with the whole of the created order and that is where the word 'dominion' comes in. We are given dominion over the created order. That doesn't mean to exploit, but to care for the earth. Some people have misunderstood that announcement of human authority. We are meant not to exploit the created order; no, we're to steward the creative order. It is a stewardship word that's used here. Within this freedom word we're given the right to steward the whole created order. In fact, the next chapter, that stewardship becomes very interesting, almost humorous.

In chapter 2 God brings all the animals in front of Adam and says, "Name them." And Adam then names the animals. Have you thought of the implications of that? We are the ones who come up with a name like hippopotamus, and then we're stuck with it for the rest of time. But, God is too. God calls the animals what we call them. God made them all and yet we name them all. In the great account between God and Job when God admires with Job the whole created order and they see together the great leviathans in the sea, God says to Job, "You call these monsters leviathans, I'll call them that too. I'll call them what you call them."

Dorothy Sayers, the English writer was fascinated with that. She notes in this fact that we are in a limited sense co-creators with God.⁴ We don't create, but we name. Adam named Eve. We get to name everything, just as we name our own children. This is the beginning of science, it's the beginning of biology and chemistry. It is the mandate to name. And when you correctly name, you gain stewardship in the good sense, and even medical -- by naming know the difference between a virus and a bacteria. By properly naming it, you know how to manage it. We are offered that right and obligation. Knowing the right name makes cures possible when a bacteria attacks us.

So science is given to us in the beginning of Genesis. I'm so grateful for people like Francis Collins, who are making that such a major point for us to understand. He, as a scientist and as a Christian, has challenged us to be deeply involved in science; science is our friend and not our enemy. We get to name everything. When we do it rightly, the earth benefits.

Yesterday on National Public Radio, I was fascinated to hear the story of a crowd of teenagers in our city who are trying to reclaim and rescue the Ana-

costia River that flows into the Potomac. Evidently, it has a lot in it that's not supposed to be in any healthy river. They found grocery store carts, they found all kinds of bad things in that river, and they're taking them out. These youth were doing this wonderful project, a stewardship dominion project on the Anacostia River. One teenage girl was being interviewed on the radio, and I loved her answer as she was asked: "Why are you doing this?" She said, "Well, I think the fish should have a right to live in that river, and they can't live there now because it's too dirty. I want them to live in that river so they can go into the Potomac too." She wants to protect these creatures, they're a part of our stewardship. That's the dominion mandate given to each of us in this text. By the way, God holds us responsible for it too. We'll see that next week.

And then fourth. The fourth thing that's discovered is that we are boundaried; notice, day six ends, there's a boundary. You'll see next week we're not so happy about that boundary, but the boundary is there. The Egyptians built pyramids to defy that boundary, they put ships in those ancient monuments so that the pharaohs could sail off; but they never sailed, it was the tomb thieves that found all those ships. And they even had food for their journey, but no pharaoh ate the food. We are boundaried. We are mortal unless a later promise changes that.

We're in the sixth day, we're not in the seventh day. The seventh day has no ending, that's the only day without an ending, that belongs to God. The sixth day has an ending. God boundaries everything, it's boundaried. That's part of the great truth and obedience vocabulary of the Bible -- that there is truth that we have to obey in order to reach our greatest destiny, and to reach our greatest truth, that's another part of this story.

By the way, did you notice the wonderful prayer by the 17th century physicist, Johanas Keplar that we read together in worship today? Did you hear what he said? "We would always bear witness to the glory of your deeds in so far as our finite hearts and minds can understand our infinity." We are finite, God is infinite. We are boundaried, that's good news folks. It's good news that there is an outer boundary. Karl Barth makes an interesting comment, he says, even our sins are boundaried, that's why we cannot do ultimate mischief.⁵ We can do mischief though, but we cannot do ultimate mischief, because ultimacy belongs to God, the last word belongs to God. Thank God for that and that is the second speech.

Well, how do you feel about this story that begins our Bible? The story's beginning starts in Genesis one, it's theme will journey with us through the Old Testament narrative of a real people who lived in a real place with their ups and their downs. Their strengths, their weaknesses, their faith in God, their harmful choices, their hopes too. How do you feel about it?

Notice all that we learn from the markers in Genesis. We've learned first of all, that God stands before it all, his truth, his word is first. We've learned that by God's decision we are given freedom, that's the word "dominion," here is the beginning of the freedom theology of the Bible. But best of all, we've met the first of the love words of the Bible, *love*, good. The One who first fashioned us is mindful of us and of all the rest of creation; he called it all good. And at the close of the sixth day, he called it very good.

God's love stands before everything in this Old Testament Story before the Grand Story; we do not want to forget that. God is mindful of us, he loves us, that starts it all off. Our Lord even added one more line to that mindfulness: Jesus said his Father even cares about a sparrow that falls.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you that it begins a journey for us, of the Story Before the Grand Story. May we discover what this means for our lives. May we discover this love, this goodness. And then Lord, may we enjoy our freedom in a way that is good and healthy. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Calvin, John. *Calvin's Commentaries*. Baker Books, 2009.

2 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters & Papers from Prison*. New York: Touchstone, 1953, 1967, 1971 by SCM Press, Ltd.

3 Pascal, Blaise. *The Pensées*.

4 Sayers, Dorothy. *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*. Eerdmans, 1969.

5 Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1959.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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