

**In the Beginning**1<sup>st</sup> in series: *Genesis: Rated “M” for “Mature”*

Genesis 1:1-2

06 06 2010 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

**Introduction to the Series**

Each **family** has its stories—past events both large and small that have shaped the present. We tell and retell these tales at reunions, holidays, birthdays, and other occasions. These memories typify and identify who we are as individuals and families.

Humans are intrigued by **stories**. We love to repeat them over and over again. They come in a rich variety of forms: jokes, fables, novels, conversations, campfire tales, and bedtime stories. They begin with words like “Knock, knock,” “How was your day?” “I remember when,” “That reminds me of the time,” “Granddaddy, tell us about the good old days,” “I used to live there,” “Once upon a time,” and so many more. These stories tell us who we are.

The **Bible** is a collection of such stories—selected tales that describe the relationship between God and humanity. During our summer worship series, we will explore the most ancient of stories found in the Old Testament book of **Genesis**. These tales are not only about individuals but also an entire nation and race . . . and ultimately, about humanity itself.

The Genesis stories are so old that they existed long before the written word. They were told and retold by nomadic people around campfires and during holy festivals. The **oral tradition** preserved the stories in a rigid, stylized form. They were told the same way over and over again so that the story became the next generation’s story. Oftentimes, the stories occurred as responses to questions that a child might ask: “How was the world created? Why do we rest on the Sabbath? Why do bad things happen? Why do rainbows appear in the sky after a storm?”

Eventually these oral traditions were preserved in **written form**. They formed the heart of the book of Genesis and the story of the Jewish people. However, Genesis is not just Israel’s history—it is OUR story. The conflicts, struggles, failures, and triumphs of the characters transcend time and place. They speak to the heart of what it means to be human . . . and what it means to be human in relationship with God.

**Genesis** is the first book of the Old Testament. It is part of the first five books of Hebrew Scripture known as “*the Torah*” or “*the Law*.” The book of Genesis can be divided into two main sections:

- |                  |                   |                                |
|------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1) Genesis 1-11  | Primeval History  | (before recorded history)      |
| 2) Genesis 12-50 | Ancestral History | (approximately 1500 - 1200 BC) |

During June and July, our worship series is entitled ***Genesis: Rated “M” for “Mature.”*** The title is inspired by two realities. First, we often tell our children the “G” rated version of the Genesis stories. These Disney-type adaptations gloss over the deeper and oftentimes darker details of the tales.

For example, the story of Noah and the Ark is a terrible and terrific saga of divine judgment and salvation. However, we tell our children about the cute animals going on a boat ride two-by-two and decorate nurseries with the images of a worldwide catastrophe!

**Genesis: Rated “M” for “Mature.”** also recognizes that Genesis is foundational to understanding who we are as God’s people. It is not an exaggeration to say that all of Scripture is read through the lens of the Genesis’ account. Studying the first book of the Bible can lead us to a more mature understanding of our faith.

This summer I encourage you to **read the book of Genesis** as a spiritual exercise. Genesis is a long book—it contains 50 chapters in all. However, it is easy to read one chapter a day over the next two months. Some of it will be familiar and other parts strange. Some of it will be easy reading and other parts difficult. Some of it will be comforting and other parts disturbing. However, we will all be blessed by the experience.

Today we begin at the beginning with the Genesis account of **creation**. In a DVD that is entitled *God’s Trombones*, James Earl Jones retells this ethnic version of God speaking the heavens and the earth into existence.

## **Introduction**

**“In the beginning . . .”** are the first words of the first sentence of the first book of the Bible. **Genesis is the story of beginnings:**

- *Bright and beautiful beginnings:* the beginning of the universe . . . the world . . . humanity . . . marriage . . . parenthood . . . family . . . community.
- *Dark and terrible beginnings:* the beginning of disobedience . . . sin . . . fall . . . judgment . . . death . . . broken relationship . . . .

The first five books of the Bible gain their titles from the opening words. Genesis 1:1 begins with the Hebrew word “*bereshith*” which literally means “*in the beginning.*” The Greek translation is “*Genesis*” which signifies “*birth,*” “*genealogy,*” or “*origin.*”

Genesis is the book of beginnings. So today we begin at the beginning . . . we begin at the beginning of all beginnings.

## **I. In the beginning, God**

**“In the beginning, God . . . .”** (Genesis 1:1)

Genesis presupposes the **existence of God**. There are no theological explanations or justifications. There is no attempt to prove God’s existence. God simply IS. Much later in Exodus when Moses asked about God’s name, the Almighty responded, “*I AM WHO I AM!*” (Exodus 3:14) If you conjugate the verb “*to be,*” then God is “*the one who is and was and will be.*” (See Revelation 1:8) The Lord is “*the Great I AM.*”

Even before the beginning, God IS. For a people who live within the context of time, this is a difficult concept to grasp. We cannot comprehend a time and place before any time and place. Children intuitively understand the dilemma when they ask, “But who created God?” or “Who were God’s parents?”

We oftentimes confuse **eternity** with time. We tend to think of eternity as a lot of time. However, eternity is a different reality in which time has no meaning.

Here's another way to understand what precedes Genesis 1:1. Think about any book or story. There are always events that took place before the beginning. And there are always events that take place after the ending. We enter and exit the story at particular moments of time. Within the context of eternity, Genesis begins when God chose to create the heavens and the earth—and time itself! However, God exists before the beginning of all things—including time and space. God is "*the great I AM!*"

"*In the beginning, God . . .*" presupposes both the existence of God and **our faith in God**. Genesis was not designed to convince its readers of God's existence. Instead, it was written for those who already believe. It is designed to help God's people understand our place in the cosmos. The first book of Bible teaches us critical lessons about who we are and whose we are. In turn, we also learn how we are to live and what we are to do.

## **II. In the beginning, God created**

"*In the beginning, God **created the heavens and the earth.***" (Genesis 1:1)

There's an exercise I use with Bible studies and Confirmation Classes. I ask the students to complete this "fill-in-the-blank" sentence: "**God is \_\_\_\_\_.**" It's a great way to jump-start imaginations to describe the attributes and characteristics of the Lord.

However, the Bible's first description of God is not a noun or an adjective; instead, it is a **verb**. The first picture of the Almighty is drawn with an action verb: "*God **created.***" The Lord God Almighty is the creator of the cosmos. From subatomic particles to galactic expanses, creation is indelibly marked with the Creator's fingerprints.

Psalm 24:1-2 declares: "*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters!*"

This image of our Creator King is fundamental and foundational to the Judeo-Christian faith. It informs our most basic understanding of who God is and who we are. The first words of **The Apostles Creed** profess: "*I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of the heavens and the earth.*"

The Almighty is the Creator of all things; therefore, we are his creation. We are sons and daughters of the King, children of the Master of Everything! Psalm 139:14 declares that we are "*fearfully and wonderfully made.*" Whenever we doubt our value and worth, we need only remember who our Maker is. The God who placed the stars in the sky knows us by name. We are of infinite value and worth to our heavenly Father.

In Psalm 8 (1, 3-5), David deftly interwove his wonder of creation and life:

*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which you have set in place,  
What is man that you are mindful of him,  
The son of man that you care for him?  
You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings,  
And crowned him with glory and honor!*

Genesis begins with the words: “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” (Genesis 1:1)

### **III. Now the earth was formless and empty**

The second verse of Genesis continues: “*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.*” (Genesis 1:2)

When Hebrew Scriptures attempt to describe what existed before creation, the writers talk about a chaotic, formless void. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse: “*Earth was a soup of nothingness, bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness.*”

The Lord created something out of nothing. Theologians use the Latin phrase “*creatio ex nihilo*” which literally means “*creation out of nothing.*” Once again this image taxes our finite brains. We cannot conceive of creating anything without something to begin with. But the Lord is the God Almighty who creates something out of nothing at all.

There was a group of scientists who decided that the modern world really didn’t need God. So they sent a representative to let the Almighty know that His services were no longer required.

The scientist said, “God, we no longer have any need for you. We have unlocked the secrets of creation itself. We can now clone people and tinker with human DNA. Our studies have even replicated how life might have begun from primordial ooze and lightning. Given enough time and material, we could duplicate all of creation.”

God listened patiently and kindly. When the scientist finished, the Lord responded, “OK, show me. Make a man out of the dirt just like I did with Adam.”

The scientist said, “No problem” and bent down to get a handful of dirt.

The Lord said, “Oh, no, go get your own dirt!”

According to The New International Version of the Bible, “*the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*” The New Revised Standard Version translation says “*a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*” The Message gives a more graphic description: “*God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.*”

I LOVE that last image—the Holy Spirit brooded over the chaos like a hen sitting on her nest. A breathless anticipation filled the void . . . .

### **IV. And God said . . .**

1) Then God **SPOKE** creation into being. God said, “*Let there be light!*” And there WAS light! Note that the sun, moon, and stars were not created until the FOURTH day. We cannot conceive of light without some sort of source. However, the Lord created light as a pure substance separate from any source. And the Maker separated the light into day and night like a potter working with clay. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

2) God said, *“Let there be an expanse between the waters!”* And it was so. Order emerged from the chaos and form out of the void. The sky appeared in the heavens. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

3) God said, *“Let the waters be gathered into one place and let the dry ground appear.”* And it was so. The mountains, valleys, and plains emerged from the waters. The dry ground separated the oceans and the seas.

God said, *“Let the land produce vegetation, seed-bearing plants and trees on the land . . . .”* And it was so. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

4) God said, *“Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky . . . .”* And it was so. The sun appeared by day and the moon and stars by night. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

5) God said, *“Let the waters teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky.”* And it was so. And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

6) God said, *“Let the land produce living creatures.”* And it was so. Animals appeared on the earth.

God said, *“Let us make man in our image, in our likeness . . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.”* God blessed First Man and First Woman and said to them, *“Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”*

*“God saw all that he had made, and it was VERY good.”* And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

7) *“Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day, God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”* (Genesis 2:1-3)

## **V. Beginning Lessons**

In his book entitled Confronting the Controversies, United Methodist minister, Adam Hamilton wrote:

“Both the Bible and science agree that the universe had a beginning point. They agree that first there was nothing, and then there was light, and from this beginning all the galaxies of the universe were formed. Three millennia before scientists told us that the earth would have been formless and void for nearly a billion years before life began to appear, the pre-scientific story of Genesis suggested this occurrence. Thirty-two centuries before Darwin proposed that life began in the seas, the author of Genesis told us that the first creatures God brought forth were in the seas . . . and three thousand years before chemists helped us understand that even human beings came from the same carbon compounds found in the earth, the writer of Genesis told us that God took the dust of the earth and shaped it into a human being and breathed into it the breath of life.” (p. 38)

What Genesis teaches us is invaluable to our understanding of the world. The lessons are also fundamental to our faith. In the beginning, we discover:

- ❖ God is the Creator
- ❖ Creation is good
- ❖ Humanity is created in the image of God.
- ❖ Therefore, we are not our own—we belong to God.
- ❖ We are stewards of the world around us, including one another.

### Conclusion

Our understanding of God and humanity begins at the beginning. “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” This simple statement is actually an affirmation of faith. God IS . . . . God IS the creator. God IS our creator. We are the work of his hands, children of the Almighty King.

Millennia later John would seek a way to begin his Gospel. He chose the words: “*In the beginning was the Word . . . .*” As God spoke creation into being, he sent his Son into the world to bring a new creation. We can be born again—recreated. In Christ, we are new creations—the old has passed away and the new has come.

According to the Hebrew way of keeping time, the **Sabbath** is celebrated from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday. If yesterday was the seventh day of the week, then today is the eighth . . . or the first depending upon your point-of-view.

Christians began to worship on Sunday in celebration of Christ’s resurrection Easter Sunday. Each Sunday is a little Easter as we gather to rejoice in the resurrection. It is also the first day of God’s NEW creation.

In Christ, NEW beginnings are always available. Every day is a second Genesis.