

Sermon: God Who?  
Text: Genesis 1  
Date: September 2, 2018  
Context: WWPC  
Labor Day Sunday, Outdoor worship  
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*In the beginning, God . . .*

Genesis 1:1a

Back when I was a student, which is to say in roughly the time of Shakespeare, when sonnets were popular and donkey carts were the main mode of transport, I took a philosophy class.

In retrospect, this was a very bad idea, given how ill-equipped I was to swim in those waters. But, like so many of the decisions I made back in those days, it made sense at the time. So I took the leap and dove in head first.

The class was focused on European continental philosophers -- this designation was to distinguish them from their English counterparts. So people like G. F. Hegel and Immanuel Kant, rather than John Locke and David Hume.

If memory serves, we started this survey of Europe's most influential thinkers with Rene Descartes. This was fitting as Descartes is widely considered to be the founder of modern western philosophy. He also played a seminal role in inventing modern mathematics, but that's another story. (Such a show off.)

As you likely know, Descartes is the author of the enduringly familiar dictum, I think, therefore I am, or *cogito, ergo sum*, in its original Latin formulation.

This short phrase was thought to be a landmark solution to one of the most seminal questions there is, the question of human identity.

How do I know that I am real? How do I know that I exist at all? Well, I think, therefore I am. Elegant, simple and brilliant. Sort of the philosophical equivalent of  $E=MC^2$ .

Eventually, though, as subsequent philosophers scrutinized Descartes' famous formulation, they realized that their brilliant colleague had fudged things a bit.

In short, he imported his destination into his starting point. That is, when you say, "I think" you've already presupposed the "I" that you are hoping to prove.

I say this because it occurred to me that one could make roughly the same observation about the opening verse of Genesis.

*In the beginning, God . . .* Reading that this week, I wanted to pause and say, wait, God who?

Whoever authored this opening creation story in the book of Genesis takes God for granted, just assumes God's existence.

They have, in effect, presupposed the idea that the subsequent story is meant to illuminate.

Now, you could argue that this is okay. That the author first stipulates God's existence of necessity, and then uses the rest of Genesis, and the rest of scripture, in defense of that assumption, proof of it, if you will.

And I think most of us would be happy to grant that concession. We're here because we, too, believe in God and want to know and learn more about God's identity and expectations of us.

But for today, as we continue our new sermon series, Living the Questions, we're going to stop right at the beginning and explore that question: God who?

Who exactly is this God of whom the author of Genesis speaks? Who is this God of the Hebrew tradition?

Of course we get several important answers to that question right here in this opening creation story.

These lyrical verses about the origins of the universe tell us a great deal about who the people of Israel believed this God to be. And they reveal to us something of the nature of the one whom the Hebrews would eventually call Yahweh.

So, some bullet point take aways about who this God is:

- This is a universal God. For in this story, God creates the universe, not just the people of Israel. This is not a provincial God. This is the God who made everything and everyone.
- This is a God who brings order out of chaos. Maybe a better way to think of this is that chaos serves as God's raw material. What play-dough or a pile of Legos is to a child, darkness and disorder are to God. Chaos is the stuff out of which God made the world and everything in it.
- This God invented work, so work itself is holy -- a point that is worth making and remembering on this Labor Day Sunday.
- This God also invented rest, so rest, too, is holy. Also a point worth making and remembering on this Labor Day Sunday.
- This is a God who desires relationship, so much so that God created the human race to share in that relationship.

So those are all clear take aways from this text. Not an exhaustive answer to the question of who the God of scripture is--there's a lot of stories still to come, lots more to learn and know about how Yahweh is and what Yahweh requires of us -- but an important start.

But in working this text this week, I realized there's an even more fundamental question in play. How did this God come to be? What is the origin of this origin story?

What I mean is that we know the origin of the Gospels. The stories about the God who redeemed us are, of course, built around the life of Jesus. It's a story with a wondrous beginning, a jaw-dropping middle and a miraculous end. But we know more or less exactly where it came from.

But where did this first creation story come from? What is the origin story for the God who created us?

It turns out that this might be an even more interesting -- and an even more relevant question -- for us to consider this morning.

We think of the book of Genesis as very old. Like somehow this origin story was itself created around the time the world was created. That's its ancient and primordial.

But that is not the case. Yes, Genesis is relatively old, but it was not born at the time of creation.

There is now consensus among Biblical scholars of all reputable traditions, Christian and Jewish alike, that Genesis was born out of exile.

That this story, and all the stories of Genesis -- and indeed, the five books that comprise the Torah, the Law, and all the stories and material they contain -- all of this arose during the time of the Babylonian captivity.

The Hebrew priests formulated the Torah, including the creation story in Genesis, to maintain Jewish identity in a time of captivity.

They told them as way to rekindle their memories of what their devotional life was like before they were subject to imperial rule. And the Torah gave them a set of practices and a theological structure that would frame and support their identity.

By remembering their past, by reciting these stories about the God who created them, by practicing the Law, keeping Sabbath and keeping kosher, they not only maintained their identity, they kept their hopes for themselves and for their future alive.

For us, in our time, it is almost impossible to appreciate how important, how fundamental this was.

Because for us, the Bible and the stories of the Bible have not just helped form and shape us, though that is certainly true. They have helped to form and shape the culture of the Western world. The Bible and its stories and teachings are baked into the foundation of western civilization.

It's less true now, but for much of the last two thousand years, Christendom and the Western world were essentially synonymous.

But this was not true for the Jews who were living in exile in Babylon. They were forced to live and move and have their being in a cultural context that was hostile to their identity, that denied their faith.

And so they told these stories to keep their own faith and identity alive, and especially to be able to pass that faith and that identity along to their children, who were doubtless prone to the seductions of Empire--to its food, its music, its enchantments, its poisons.

And so it makes perfect sense that the first thing God does in a situation like that is to bring order out of chaos.

Modern translations of Genesis one now all recognize that the opening line of this story is “grammatically problematic” as Walter Brueggeman has put it. That it is built around one of the most consequential dependence clauses in all of literature.

Directly and literally translated from the Hebrew, the opening two verses of Genesis are more accurately rendered:

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep*

God picks up this creative work in the middle of the chaos. Takes what is already there -- a formless void, a mass of darkness -- and creates something beautiful and good out of it.

On this view, Genesis one is less a creation story and more a declaration of faith. As a piece of exile literature: it describes not only who the Israelites believed God to be but who they believed themselves to be, who they aspired to be: a faithful people, a resolute people, a people in covenantal relationship with a God who was bigger and greater and more loving than the emperor under whose lash they lived.

The question then follows: did the Hebrew people create God, rather than the other way around?

No, this story, and the God it portrays, arose out of their lived experience. Yes, it is a narrative born out of necessity, but it is also a narrative born out of their long faithfulness, out of their resistance. Out of their hope.

And it is a true story, a story that is just getting started.

So, what about you?