

UNIT ONE: THE HUMAN SITUATION

SESSION TWO: CREATION, PART ONE – THE WORLD

Summary of the Second Session

The Dog Picture

We began the session by looking at a photograph of a dog. I told the group I was going to offer them three explanations of the photograph and wanted them to tell me which was true.

First, I explained the photograph as a micro-thin silver engraving made with light and processed with chemicals. As I went briefly through the process, I asked them to assume the “facts” I was giving them to be correct.

Next, I explained the photograph as a boxer dog, and I described the animal biologically in terms of its classifications. They realized, of course, that the photograph was not itself a boxer dog but a picture of one. In most areas of life, adults automatically eliminate absurd literalism, realizing my saying, “This is a boxer dog,” means the animal pictured, not the picture itself. Strangely, this adult skill for eliminating of the literal when a statement is obviously not literal often fails to function when the meaning of the Bible is sought.

Finally, I told the group the photo was our family’s dog, Ben, who had lived with us for eleven years and died our first spring in Bridgeton. I added, “We loved him.”

When I asked which of the three explanations of the photograph was true, everyone said all three were true. Playing devil’s advocate, I asked how it was possible for all three to be true. If one were true, didn’t the other two have to be false? To adults, the question was ridiculous, and so they quickly declared all three explanations true but from three different points of view.

Three different truths had been told about the same object. Only one was true literally, but all three were true, and the third explanation was most profoundly true because it told a truth that mattered personally to the one speaking it.

Pilate’s Question: What is truth?

In the Gospel of John, when Pilate asks him whether or not he is a king, Jesus says he came into the world to testify to the truth. Cynically, the Roman Governor of Jerusalem asks, “What is truth?”

Truth Comes in Different Kinds

Here is one kind of truth: $2 + 2 = 4$. That truth may not move us emotionally or persuade us to change our lives, but we rely upon it (and all the mathematical truth it represents) to balance our checkbooks, calculate our savings, and do the figuring required of us in a scientific and technical world. We assume this kind of truth and take it literally, at least until someone deliberately uses it figuratively. Elementary school teachers, for example, may tell us that every child more than twenty in a classroom equals five additional children. We know what they mean, and we may even be able to appreciate the problems caused by overly large classes, but this figurative use of numbers speaks a truth different from the mathematical.

Here is another kind of truth: Balboa discovered the Pacific Ocean. That “fact” was the answer to a test question in my childhood; so I learned it dutifully. Only in high school did I question the fact of Balboa’s discovery. Had not people been swimming, boating, and fishing in that body of water for uncounted centuries before Balboa reached its shores on the far side of our continent? The truth I had learned for the test was actually not a fact at all but a prejudice. Balboa was the first European white man to report having seen this body of water, and he named it *Pacifico*, the peaceful ocean. Mark Twain wrote that the very ink with which history is written is fluid prejudice. This truth is historical, but the history is conditioned by the viewpoint (and prejudice) of its writers.

Few of us would expect the same truth from a Romantic novel we would seek in a history text on the same period of history. We recognize the different kinds of truth in a poem, a newspaper article, and a research paper. We have read fiction we believed to be true and “objective” reporting we recognized as false.

I offered lines from two songs about love. One says, “Love is a many-splendored thing.” The other laments, “If I’d never loved, I never would have cried.” Which is true? The answer depends upon the mood and recent experience of the person asked, and experience may move a person from one truth to the other.

A Ridiculous Love Story

As I do with the regular confirmation classes, I shared with the adults the story of Joe and Jennifer, two young adults walking hand-in-hand along the beach on a moonlit night. They stop and face each other, looking into each other’s eyes. Then, . . .

1. Joe says, “Jennifer, love is a strong emotional attachment to another person combined with a strong personal commitment to that other person’s well-being.” She just looks at him.
2. Joe says, “Jennifer, I love you.” She replies, “Joe, I’m glad to know that. I think someone who loves is a good person, and I admire you for it.” He just looks at her.

3. How is the scene supposed to go? Obviously, when Joe tells Jennifer he loves her, he hopes she will answer, “I love you, too, Joe.”

Let’s analyze the three takes on the love story. In each, information is offered, and a kind of truth is told (assuming the professions of love are real and honest). In the first two takes, however, the information is inappropriate to the kind of truth the situation requires. Joe’s definition of love is not bad, but it’s wrong in context. Likewise, Jennifer’s character assessment is true enough as far as it goes, but it makes a very unsuitable response to Joe’s declaration of his love for her. To complete the truth in this situation, Jennifer must respond to Joe’s life-changing word to her. If she does, the couple’s words have the power to establish their relationship at a new level, almost to create a relationship that did not exist before.

The Bible’s truth is of this life-changing, life-giving, creative kind. It demands our response. We may know much about the Bible without having heard its truth at all, because its truth is the “I love you” kind that requires our response to be “heard” truly. The Bible contains information. It tells us about God and life, but the Bible’s truth is not complete without our response, and that response changes life and changes us.

The mere acceptance of the Bible as true is not the acceptance of its truth. Here is the folly of the “Bible-believer.” Accepting the Bible as factually true is not accepting its truth (and sometimes gets in the way of hearing its truth). When we open ourselves to the Bible’s truth, we are drawn to the God who speaks the life-giving truth of redemptive love to us, through the witness of the Bible.

In the same way, belief in the existence of God is not belief in God. I believe in the planet Pluto, meaning I believe it exists out there in space beyond my sight; but I don’t really care. Believing in the existence of Pluto does nothing to change the way I think, speak, or behave; it does not alter my plans or hopes in any way. The New Testament (written in Greek) speaks literally of “believing into” God or Jesus. That phrase doesn’t work in English, but it might help us understand the personal nature of believing in God – of putting ourselves into the belief, which is not just the acceptance of the mere “fact” of God’s existence, but a trust that engages me so much it changes my life. If I were to learn tomorrow that scientists had been mistaken and that there really was no planet Pluto after all, I would suffer no loss.

The Way the Bible Speaks God’s Truth to Us

There are many problems for us in reading the Bible. It is written in three ancient languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), not in English. The culture and thinking of ancient Israel were very different from ours. There was no science when the Bible’s books were written.

The first creation story in Genesis adapts a myth of the ancient Near East to tell the truth of God’s creation of the world. The world-view of that time and place pictured a three-story world.

The earth (land and waters covering land) was flat and founded upon great pillars sunk in the Nether Sea. The sea itself was formed by the splitting or dividing of the waters above the vault of heaven (firmament) from the waters beneath. In the Babylonian creation myth, the god Marduk slays the chaos monster Tiamat (the primeval sea) and splits her body to form the two great bodies of water above and below the vault of heaven. In Genesis, there is no chaos monster nor any opposition to God, but the word translated “deep” (“and darkness was upon the face of the deep”) relates to the sea of chaos personified in the myth as Tiamat.

We cannot accept the world view of the ancient Near East. We do not live on a flat earth, and for us the vault of heaven has been replaced by the vast reaches of space. Our stars are not lights set in the firmament but huge suns at distances so great they must be measured in light years.

Must we, therefore, reject the truth of Genesis? No, God’s truth is not dependent upon the human world view used to communicate it in a given time and place. The profound, life-giving truth of the Creator who loves us still comes through the Genesis creation story to us today, if we learn how to listen. The problem is that we must translate more than just the language (from Hebrew into English); we must translate the thought forms, the world view, and the concepts of life into our language and understanding of the world.

The ancient Israelites were much less literal than we are. They loved to exaggerate and embellish their stories, a practice we may regard as not telling the truth; to them, it told the truth more profoundly. They used numbers figuratively. Three, seven, twelve, and forty were good numbers representing wholeness (shalom). Six was a bad number, representing the incomplete. Is that, perhaps, why the number of the beast in Revelation is 666? Is evil just a three-fold incompleteness, a colossal fraud doomed to failure? For Genesis and Jesus, 77 or 70 x 7 were not numbers of literal count, but a way of extending the completeness of seven. So, to forgive a brother or sister 77 times or 70 x 7 times was to extend forgiveness without count or limit.

Through all the translating necessary, the Bible still speaks God’s truth to us today in our time and place. The love and purpose of Israel’s Redeemer/Creator God still confronts us with life, hope, and salvation.

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a. The First (but Newer) Creation Story

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Think of all the hopeless things we might have been told instead. “In the beginning, a horrible demon made the world.” We could find evidence in our world that it might be so. “In the beginning, the world (or universe) just happened by accident.” Many people think so, especially those who understand neither science nor the Bible. If it were so, we ourselves would be merely accidents of nature, and our lives would be short and meaningless. Our task, if we had one, would be to perpetuate the accident by producing succeeding generations. “In the beginning, God created the world but, then, grew bored or disgusted and left the world on its own, letting nature and human nature take their courses.” Again, we could

find evidence to suggest this view might be true, but happily it is not the Bible's message of truth to us and about us.

To hear the truth of Genesis, God's truth to us, we must understand the connections between creation and redemption. The God who brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt is the same God who created the world, and (conversely) the Creator is the same God who is the Redeemer. Israel knew God first as Redeemer and Savior, then as Creator. So, the Creator God was never anyone other than Yahweh, the covenant God who had given the people life, freedom, and hope. Their Savior was their maker and the maker of the whole world.

Because Israel's Redeemer God was also the Creator of all things, the force of salvation could not be limited. Yahweh's love for them could never fail. No power in this world (such as the Babylonian empire) could defeat the redemptive purpose of Yahweh their God. On the other hand, neither could God's love and God's redemptive purpose be restricted to Israel. To be true to God, Israel had to realize its life and freedom were meant to be extended by God's love to all nations and peoples, even to the entire created order.

God creates by command: "Let there be light, and there was light." This creation by the word of command is theology, not science. Genesis knows nothing and says nothing of natural formation of the universe. We are learning purpose and relationship, not process. We are seeing how much care God puts into the world and how God creates a world in harmony – a world that is "very good." We see that God's will is for life and wholeness, for order not chaos, for shalom throughout creation.

The Problem: the Special Creature

"Let us make humankind in our image." To whom is God speaking? The Hebrew word for God used here is Elohim, which is a plural noun used sometimes as a singular ("God") and sometimes as a plural or collective noun ("gods" or the council of God, the heavenly host). The point seems to be that God pauses here to reflect and proceeds with this next creation in a unique way. This next creature is to be made in the image and likeness of God. More of God's self will somehow be put into this creature, which does not mean this creature will be partly divine or have a divine spark, but does mean this one will have a special relation to God.

"Image" is a physical thing, a statue. "Likeness" is less physical – we do not look like God, or, rather, God does not look like us. Yet, we are made to represent God in the world. We are created to be responsive to God and responsible for representing God's will in the world – the will for harmony and wholeness throughout the created order. We are (as Cain will deny) our brother and sister's keeper or guardian. We are made to care for God's world and for each other. So, we are the living representation of God in the world.

Male and female, together we are created in God's image. There is no division or hierarchy. Humanity comes in two kinds, and we'll see why in the second creation story (besides procreation,

indicated here by “be fruitful and multiply). The humans are given dominion, and as Christians today we struggle with our own past to understand what that dominion means. At times, it was understood as the right to use and destroy, to lay waste, to expend the earth’s resources as we pleased (although former peoples never believed those resources could be used up). Remember, in ancient times, the issue of dominance was survival not wholesale destruction and abuse of the earth. Ancient people were very vulnerable to nature. So, God’s blessing may be understood to mean we are not created to be victims but to be stewards – caretakers for the Creator. Today, our dominion has the power to destroy the earth, and so we need to learn to read Genesis differently. Ironically, our ability to destroy the world has put us back into the position of potential victims – this time, of ourselves.

Stewardship (not fund-raising) is a major theological theme for post-modern human beings. Science and technology have produced great achievements, and it is foolish for us to belittle them (as we enjoy their benefits), but they have not delivered us from the danger of destruction, nor have they given us mastery over our lives and destinies. Since our Redeemer and Savior is also our Creator and the world’s, we need to take much more seriously God’s love for the world and God’s intention that the world should be made whole and harmonious as intended. We must not leave earth for burning while we escape into heaven.

The Saddest Words?

“For of all sad words of tongue or pen,/ The saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’” (John Greenleaf Whittier, “Maud Muller”) Is Genesis the picture of a lost world, a paradise gone? Is it an indictment of us meant to leave us hiding in shame in the bushes of life, like the people in the Garden of Eden? When we read that God saw everything created and, “behold, it was all very good,” we are forced to see the contrast between that good world and the one in which we actually live and die. Is Genesis the sad story of what might have been?

No, it is what shall be. The Creator is the Redeemer. God does not intend the earth for destruction but for life and wholeness – that is the message (the gospel) of Genesis. As our Bible begins with the creation of heaven and earth, so it ends (Revelation 21:1-6) with God’s creation of a new heaven and earth in which the “sea” (chaos) is no more and mourning, crying, and pain are no more.

The first creation story sets creation into the seven-day week of God’s covenant with Israel, and, indeed, the final Sabbath will come. At the end of Revelation, God says, “It is finished!” – not over and destroyed but completed. Creation and Redemption will be one.

What Kind of Question?

To finish the session, we worked through a list of questions, determining which were scientific, which theological, and which could be both, depending upon the nature of the answer.

We also discussed the question of science: “What happened, and under what conditions did it happen?”

Science never rightly asks the question, “Why?” A scientist, being a person, may ask it, but science as such may not. The question of why implies purpose and will. So, science does not ask why sodium hydroxide and hydrochloric acid combine to form salty water; it asks about the conditions under which the chemical reaction occurs. Science observes a happening (phenomenon) and describes what happened. Science takes measurements to determine, as quantitatively as possible, under what conditions the happening happened – the phenomenon occurred. When the conditions and their proper quantities (and order, etc.) have been determined, the happening should be repeatable under controlled conditions (unless science is looking at something as large as the formation of stars and planets which cannot be reproduced). The knowledge gained of “under what conditions” may enable science to make predictions about “what happens if and when.” Technology modifies these “conditions under which” the happening happens in order to modify and control the results. That’s it. Why the happening happened is a matter of will and purpose, of benevolence or malevolence, and such is not the realm of science.

Theology and faith want to know who and why: not how human beings were formed, but why – for what purpose and destiny? What is the meaning of life? Who gives life meaning and truth? What are the goals of living? How does God want us to relate to each other?

God is not an object for scientific study. God is subject. The Creator is not part of the creation. In many ways, with great depth and promise, the Bible completes the sentence, “For God so loved the world. . . .”