

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Savior Jesus Christ, amen.

All my life I've wrestled with what to do with this story of creation. As a biology major in college many years ago, I studied things like evolution and learned about fossils and carbon dating. I believe the earth is billions of years old. I believe the creation stories in the Bible are meant to reveal God to humankind, not a scientific account of how God created the universe. So, if we're not supposed to take this story of the creation of the world literally, what are we to make of it?

First and foremost, this is a story about relationship. It's the story about how God fell in love with what he created and moved in to be among His creation. In order to understand the kind of literature this creation story is, we have to forget everything we know as 21st century Christians and enter into the ancient near eastern mindset. If you're thinking of a comfortable place to ponder the origins of the universe, the South Pole would probably be pretty far down on your list. The warmest temperature ever recorded there was just 9.9 degrees Fahrenheit, and the lowest was -117 degrees -- not exactly the kind of place to put one in a garden-of-Eden frame of mind. Yet, the South Pole is the perfect place for cosmic contemplation because it's the one place on Earth where you can get closest to space and still be on the ground. So, science people love the South Pole. People

of faith, not so much... Ever since the Enlightenment, science and religion have often been at odds over the origins of life and the universe and there's a lot at stake in the debate. This is a stumbling block for so many who just can't get past some Christians' insistence that they must believe the creation story, literally. They're afraid if creation didn't happen exactly how and when the Bible says, then maybe the other 1,187 chapters of the Bible aren't true either. I believe there's a way to understand the stories in Genesis 1-3 as authoritative while still making room for discoveries like those happening at the South Pole and the cosmic things we can observe through powerful telescopes like the ones located at the South Pole.

(SLIDE)

Old Testament scholar and Wheaton College professor John Walton thinks so too. In his intriguing book *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, Walton says science and Scriptures observe the same universe through two different but equally valid lenses -- like the difference between viewing Van Gogh's painting "Starry Night" **(SLIDE)** and looking at a picture of deep space from the Hubble Space Telescope. They are both true in the sense that they describe an actual thing: the night sky. **(SLIDE)** Van Gogh wasn't trying to describe the night sky scientifically; that's a function of the telescope. Van Gogh painted an artistic rendering of the reality he saw. It's a picture made to tell a story in ways beyond scientific description. There is, in other words, a way to tell a story that transcends

our post-Enlightenment categories of true versus false, science versus myth. The writers and first readers of Genesis would not have recognized those categories. They would instantly know this is a story less about “cosmic creation” and more about “cosmic elation” -- the joy of a creating God who creates all things “good.”

So, what does the text mean when it says that God “created”? Walton concludes that Genesis 1 is not describing the *material* origins of the universe as we have assumed, but rather the *functional* origins of the world. In other words, Genesis is less about how God made the world than about how God made it to function. When it is functioning well, it is “good”, and God delights in it! Just look at how our text begins: “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, while a wind from God swept over the waters”. It's important to note God is, in fact, starting with raw materials. If this were a text concerned with material origins like, the “Big Bang” theory, we would expect the text to start with nothing, but here we have this formless void, the darkness and “the deep.” We miss this, but an ancient person would have understood what's going on here: these are all indicators of chaos and non-order. The Hebrew word for “formless” is *tohu* -- it means to lack worth or purpose. So, what is God's response to this lack of worth and purpose? God “creates” worth and purpose in brining order out of chaos. The Hebrew word for “create” is *bara*. “Create” can refer to a lot of things, so to

understand its meaning, we look at the way the writer uses it. *Bara* is used some 50 times throughout the Old Testament, and in most of those cases, it has to do with creating something for a specific role or function. God doesn't just create something; *God creates stuff for a specific purpose.*

When God creates “light” and calls it “day” God is not merely creating light, but rather the function of *time*. On the second day, God “separates” the waters, creating the function of *weather*. On the third day God creates vegetation in order to *provide food*. In other words, God begins by creating the functions of time, weather and food -- all the things necessary for human existence. The function of the animals is to be fruitful and multiply. Finally, on the sixth day, God creates humankind, whose function is to care for the creation, have dominion over it and reflect the image of God within it. Everything is created for a purpose, and at the end of the sixth day, God looks at it all and calls it “very good” -- it's all functioning as he intended.

The seventh day is different. There's this curious description: “And on the seventh day, God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done.” Why does God need to rest? It makes me think of a weary God, kicking his feet up, and sitting back in a Lazy Boy Recliner with a tall glass of God's favorite adult beverage. Why would our all powerful God need a nap? This description of the seventh day *is actually the key to*

understanding all of Genesis 1 and, in fact, the whole biblical narrative. The ancient people would have instantly understood this to be a temple-building story. In the ancient pagan world, people believed gods only “rested” in temples. In fact, temples were constructed for this purpose. Temples weren’t merely residences for the gods, they were also the places from which the gods controlled the cosmos. When a god is at rest, it means there is security and stability within an ordered system because that particular god is in control. This is not rest in the sense of relaxation, but rest in the sense of all is right in the world. In reading this text, those ancient Hebrews would have known this was the whole point of the first six days of creation. God sets things in their proper order and function. Creation was now prepared and ready as a temple in which God will dwell with his people, it’s the first “Emmanuel moment,” -- when God comes to dwell with us! The first six days are really about God building a house. The seventh day, it becomes God’s home. The creation account is not merely an itemization of the material things that were scientifically or supernaturally formed at such and such a time and in such and such a manner. No, creation is the place where God lives and in which God delights.

At the end of the Bible, as we heard last week from Revelation, Chapter 21 and 22 the theme is the same, God will dwell with his people again. This is the stunning glory of the creation story. It's not so much about the *how*, but about the

who. Our God is revealed as one who creates for the purpose of relationship.

When we understand creation in this way, we better understand our place within it.

- † We're not merely the product of cosmic dust and eons of evolution.
- † We're beloved by the God who created us in his image.
- † The earth is not merely a happy accident, but God's dwelling place.
- † We're priests in God's temple - our vocation is to care for it in God's name.
- † We're not just animals who die, but people made in the image of God.
- † We're humans about whom God cared enough to send Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sin and brokenness.

Sabbath reminds us of this reality. Sabbath isn't just for us to take a break and go to the lake or go golfing or whatever people do who choose not to attend worship services. Instead, we gather to stop our daily routine and marvel at the God who started it all and is still in control. We enjoy God's dwelling with us. We're reminded again, "God is in his holy temple..." We gather to hear the promise of Scripture -- that God will rest and abide with us forever. Where creation has been gives way to the glory of God who makes all things new.

The South Pole might be the one place on Earth which is closest to space and the expanse of the universe, but Genesis 1 tells us we don't have to go that far to touch the face of God. May this story of creation bring us to understand we were created for a purpose, to love and worship our God and to care for the creation God loved enough to dwell within. May God never leave us, but stay and rest with us forever. Amen.