

Bad Uses of a Good Story

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

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

It’s the first story in our Bible. It’s one of the longest continuous stories in all of scripture, running thirty-four and a half verses. And.... it’s a story that at times has caused no small dissension between the church and the world, the church and modern science, the church and itself.

It was in the early 1600s when the astronomer Galileo inspected the heavens with his telescope and confirmed the new Copernican theory that the earth moved around the sun rather than vice versa; and the church denounced him as a heretic.

“On February 24, 1616, the pope’s consulting theologians declared that the propositions of the sun’s being at the center and the earth’s revolving around it were ‘absurd in philosophy and formally heretical, *because [it ran] expressly contrary to Holy Scripture*’” (H. Stephen Shoemaker, *GodStories*, 16-17).

I have no idea how heated those conversations must have been, how severe the judgment handed down on Galileo must have felt — but I have witnessed firsthand how this story has been used to divide Christians.

Fast forward some four hundred years from Galileo’s being declared a heretic and imagine Christen and I in the basement of the Baptist Collegiate Ministries House in Laramie, Wyoming. We’d just moved back to Wyoming to finish up our college degrees, and decided to join the BCM students for their weekly gathering in the basement of the house.

On this particular night, after we’d shared a meal, we were invited to sit in a circle. The BCM Director handed out pens and post-its to every student. He invited us to write our burning theological questions on those pieces of paper, fold them up, and drop them in his hat.

Once we’d all done so, he’d pull a question out, read it aloud, and invite us to begin a conversation around it. What did we think? How did we understand that question? On what did we rely to answer it?

Frankly, I don’t remember much of the night, because it either wasn’t interesting enough to remember *or* because the part I do remember was so intense that everything else paled in comparison.

It started when he pulled a yellow post-it out of his hat and read: “Did God really create the world in seven days?”

There was a long pause as we all looked at each other nervously. I mean, we were students at the University of Wyoming! Surely, we'd taken earth science. Surely there were science majors in the room. But how do you reconcile the "Big Bang" theory or the theory of evolution with Holy Scripture?

Loooooong pause...

No one knew what to say.

Well, one kid did — a sort of goofy looking kid from Kentucky who loved to ride his road bike everywhere. He was also in his final year at the university as a geology major. After a few moments of anxious silence, he jumped right in: "If the Bible says seven days, it took seven days."

The other science majors in the room looked shocked. "What?! How can you say that? You're majoring in geology! You know what the science says!"

Suddenly, the "dialogue" had escalated into a "debate."

He shouted back, "But before I'm a scientist, I'm a Christian! And I believe in the inerrancy of the Bible. If the Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!"

"But the Bible also says that the sun revolves around the earth! Do you believe that too?!"

That's when it started to get ugly. Others started jumping in, shouting at one another and shaking their fists: "What good is our Christian witness if we doubt the very first story in the Bible?"

"What good is our Christian witness" the other side shouted back, "if we're willing to accept absurdities over reason?"

Their shouting grew louder. The "debate" stooped to "name-calling," and accusations of Biblical illiteracy. The room began to physically divide into two lines squaring off against each other... over scripture... a scene that we've watched play out too many times in our history.

And that's when the kid from Kentucky played the "heretic" card. Over the top of everyone, he shouted, "If you don't believe in a seven day creation, then you can't be a Christian!!"

Now, let me remind you that this was mine and Christen's first time at this gathering with any of these kids. We were wide-eyed with jaws on the floor as the scene unfolded. But when this kid decided to play the "heretic" card, I couldn't take it anymore.

I stood up and walked to the middle of the room — right between the warring factions — and I waited until my presence was awkward enough to make everyone go quiet.

I said, “I’m new and none of you have any reason to listen to a word I have to say.” Then I pointed to the Bible in my hand and said, “But, I don’t remember a singletime in scripture when Jesus said, ‘Come follow me... unless you don’t believe in a seven day creation. Then never mind. I have no need of you. You can stay home, because I can’t have any followers who don’t believe in a literal seven day creation.”

I learned long time ago that often the best way to trump the “heretic” card is to play the “Jesus” card.

How is it that we have turned this incredible piece of poetry into a basis for determining if you can be a Christian or not?

Is that what this story is for — a litmus test for whether we can follow Christ or not?

The ways this passage has been abused in order to abuse others and abuse our earth is long and dark and we will be held accountable for it.

For instance, the ecological devastation that we have committed in the name of the word “dominion” is only becoming evident to us now. Funny, isn’t it, that it took quarantine to remember what Denver looked like without a thick cloud of smog resting on its front range.

I have visited the university in South Africa that used this story to develop its theology for supporting apartheid. Apartheid, if you will remember, was the legal system of segregation and discrimination on the ground of race that was used to abuse people of color in that country.

You walk on the grounds and it looks like an Ivy League school. The Christian theologians there argued that the separation of heavens from waters and waters from land and *dark from light* laid a theological argument for apartheid — and keeping those dark bodies separated from the light ones.

Would God be proud of such interpretations? Would that interpretation make God smile?

You know, despite the fact that it’s the first story in our modern Bibles, many, many scholars do not believe this to be one the oldest stories in scripture. In fact, they argue that it was mostly likely written after the Jewish people had already been exiled by Assyria and Babylon. That means they think it was composed and became normal scripture for the Hebrew people *after* the time of Abraham, *after* the time of Moses, *after* the time of David, *after* the Temple had been built, *after* Israel had become a nation and had fallen, *after* they Jewish people had been drug into slavery.

These scholars suggest that it was written when Jewish people had no control and no order over their own lives.

The ones who survived the violent invasions were taken as slaves into the courts of their enemies' kings. They were forced to serve those who had taken them from their homes. Their land, their freedom, their families, their place of worship, their identity as Jewish people all stripped from them. Could things get any worse?

And that is when they decided to write a poem about the created order — and the God who created it.

"In the beginning, God created..."

It's not meant to be read like a seven day historical account of how the world came into being. It's *poetry*. It's meant to be heard with your heart. That's why I asked Sam to read it — because when he reads poetry, people listen!

In 1916, Carl Sandburg published his famous poem entitled, "Fog." It reads:

*The fog comes
on little cat feet.*

*It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.*

Do you think that Carl Sandburg meant that the fog actually had the legs and feet of a little cat? Of course not! Poems aren't meant to be read literally. They're meant to be heard with our hearts.

The Jews who had been drug off into exile had hearts weighed down with trouble. Could it get any worse? Where was God in all this chaos? How could so much bad befall them?

That's when the theologians of their day wrote a poem — a hymn — about creation and how God orders all of creation not for bad, not for ill, but for *good*.

That is the repeated refrain of this hymn. Seven times it is repeated:

*"God said: Let it be
And it was so
And God saw that it was good."*

Have we forgotten? Have we forgotten that the whole point and refrain of this creation story isn't about "how" it came to be, *but that it is good?*

It seems to me that too often we believe our Bible begins with the story of “original sin.” But the testimony of this story is that the universe began not with “original sin,” but original *blessing*.

What a difference can be made to our world view if we start with creation’s inherent *goodness*, and not it’s flawed-ness; with humanity’s goodness, and not it’s flawed-ness.

And if a group of people under the thumb of Babylon — stripped of their freedom, forcibly divorced from their land and loved ones — can remember that creation is *good*, then so can we.

And if creation is *good*, then so is the God Whom we trust brought it into being.

So why don’t we put away interpretations that divide and separate us? Why don’t we put away interpretations that empower us to abuse others or God’s creation, and instead see this story as an opportunity to become the *good* thing God always desired for us to be?

This past week, our nation has been in turmoil.

Riots and protests over the unjust death of George Floyd have rocked the hearts of many of our country’s major cities. The protests have even spread across the ocean and begun in other countries.

Many protest peacefully. Some don’t. They seem to have forgotten that in trying to “stick it to the man,” they might also hurt their own neighbors.

Frankly, it’s yet another opportunity to be divided; to be separated into categories; to undermine the “image of God” that is present in each and every one of us. And, the rhetoric can make it flat-out hard to remember that God’s creation is, in fact, *good*.

It’s hard to know what to do; how to act; what to say. What *good* can we do in the face of injustice? What *good* can we do in response to such raw, unbridled emotion? What *good* can we do in response to such wrongs?

What *good* can we do?

Have you ever heard the story of “The Star Thrower?”

He was a scientist on vacation, roaming the beach, seeing what the ocean had offered onto its sandy shore the night before. His name was Loren Eiseley, and he looked with the eye of a scientist and saw natural selection at work. He saw shells with tiny animals inside, he saw a small octopus dying on the sand, and he saw hundreds of starfish the stormy waters had washed ashore. “In the end,” he mused darkly to himself, “the sea rejects its offspring.”

As he walked along, he saw another kind of death at work: the flashlights of professional shellers as they greedily gathered the starfish from the sand and stuffed them into their bags — bags of dying starfish.

He walked around a bluff — the sun now rising, and there before him “a gigantic rainbow... had sprung into existence.” Near the foot of the rainbow, he saw a human figure. He could hardly make it out. The figure was looking down. It stooped and flung some object beyond the breaking surf. As Eiseley drew close, he saw the man reach down again and pick up a... starfish.

“It’s still alive?” he asked.

“Yes,” said the man, and he took the star and spun it far into the sea. “It may live if the offshore pull is strong enough,” he said gently.

“Do you collect?” Eiseley asked.

“Only for the living,” he said, and he stooped and threw another star. “The stars,” he said, “throw well. One can help them.”

As he walked on, he reached a bend in the shore, turned back, and saw the man stoop and throw another.

“For a moment,” Eiseley later wrote in his famous essay, “in the changing light, the sower appeared magnified, as though casting larger stars upon some greater sea. He had... the posture of a god.”

But then Eiseley’s eyes refocused and he entered into an internal debate about nature’s law of tooth and claw, where death is some sad rule of progress. He recalled Freud and the inner struggle between darkness and light in the human soul. He remembered the twisters that destroyed his boyhood home. He remembered the biblical injunction, “Love not the world... neither the things that are in the world.”

And he thought to himself, “But I *do* love the world. I love its small ones, the things beaten in the strangling surf, the bird, singing, which flies and falls and is not seen again... I love the lost ones, the failures of the world.” And he said to himself, “I must go back and find the star thrower.”

When Eiseley reached the man, he picked up a still-living star and spun it himself far out into the waves.

“Call me another thrower,” was all he said to the man. And he picked up another and flung it into the sea. He could feel the movement of his body in the repetition of throwing. It felt *good*. “It was like sowing — the sowing of life...” (Shoemaker, *GodStories*, 317-319).

What story will you let be the guide of your life... and what interpretation of that story?

Will it be a version that leads to more division, more separation? Will it be one that permits abuse if it helps you get what you want?

Or will it be one that challenges you to use the power you've been given for *good*? To sow life and not death – even if it's one small starfish at a time?

What *good* can you do? The answer is: only as much *good* as you *choose* to do.

Amen.