

Everyone knows the story of the ugly duckling, right? Somehow a baby swan gets raised with ducklings. Everyone makes fun of how ugly he is, and he feels all self-conscious. But in the end, he grows up to become a beautiful swan.

The moral of the story is supposed to help awkward kids be assured that one day things will get better, that one day they'll be a beautiful swan.

The thing about that story is "Hold on it'll get better eventually" is a nice message, but it doesn't actually make anything better in the here-and-now. Because there's nothing wrong with the baby swan. What's wrong is the story he's living. He thinks he's supposed to be a duck because that's how he's grown up. That's the story he's been living in, with his fake duck mom and adopted duckling siblings. Everything about his life and circumstances are telling him he's a duck, but *they're wrong*.

What would actually be better for the ugly duckling would be for him to realize right now that he's not a duckling at all. It would've been better for him to start living as a swan now, not wait until some far off later date.

The reason the story of the ugly duckling connects with us is because we understand at a basic level that when we're not who we were created to be, we suffer. A swan shouldn't try to be a duck. It doesn't go well for the swan.

The same is true for us. We're surrounded by companies and cultures that want to tell us who we are. People and products clamoring for our loyalty, our attention, our time. Any number of messages telling us we're some sort of duckling.

We're told that we are consumers, that having enough of the right stuff will make us happy. But we haven't managed to find that magic combination of stuff yet.

We're told that we are producers, that putting in a few more hours, a couple more practices, getting a little higher grade will make us the perfect employee, parent or student. But no matter how much we do, it's not quite enough.

We face demands from the people we love, expectations they have of us that we fail to meet.

Always, all around us. All sorts of stories that don't quite fit. And just like that ugly duckling, we wonder if it's going to be better someday. If eventually, if we just keep trying to be a duck hard enough, we'll figure it out.

The problem is, we're not ducks. The expectations we face are wrong expectations. We need a better story, one that truly informs who we are.

We find that story in Genesis 1. Throughout this series so far, we've seen that this is more than just an origins story. How does this creation story illuminate God's intention for humanity? What does that teach us about our purpose? And is it possible that as we learn Genesis' story, we'll find that we're ugly ducklings, living the wrong stories, trying to be ducks when God created us as swans?

For the last two weeks, we've been in the first few verses. Genesis 1 opens with God hovering over the world as an uncreated jumbled mess. And throughout Genesis 1, God orders and shapes. God assigns roles and meaning. All of creation is building, taking shape, moving clearly towards some completed state.

And the final piece of the puzzle is humanity. We are the last thing created on the last day of creating. Humanity is the crown jewel of creation. But before we read, a little context:

We don't know it, but Genesis is having an argument. This story was written while the Jewish people were captive in Babylon, sometime in the 500 BCs. At the time it was written, the Babylonian Empire had its own creation story, which was the foundation of their culture, their worldview. And as a conquered people, the Jewish people were expected to learn that story, learn the Babylonian religion, adopt their worldview.

But the Jewish people knew the Babylonian version was wrong. They wrote their own version of the creation story, one which featured Yahweh, the true God, instead of Marduk, the Babylonian god. We don't know that because the Babylonian religion died with the Babylonian empire. We only even know about their creation story because of fragments archaeologists and historians have found. But when we read Genesis in light of its original context, when we listen in on the original argument it was having, we find powerful truth.

What's interesting about the Genesis 1 story isn't necessarily that humans were created last. In all the ancient near eastern creation stories, like Genesis 1 and the Babylonian story, humans were created last. So the *fact* that humans are the last creation on the sixth day isn't surprising. What's different in Genesis is the *reason* humanity was created. And different is informative.

In the Babylonian creation story, the gods created humanity to be slaves. Literally, the gods want to lounge around and have someone feed them. Those stories are explicit: the gods don't want to have to work, so they create humans to be slaves and work for them.

Now let's read how Genesis describes the creation of humanity together:

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like ourselves. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground."

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." -- Genesis 1:26-28 (NLT)

According to Genesis, God created humanity in God's image. We're not slaves. We bear the image of the creator of the universe. We have been given rule over the creation. We're not slaves, we're partners with God.

Genesis says that God created this world, gave it an Order, a Way, so that we could enjoy it with God. Genesis says that we are most fully human, most fully ourselves, when we live in God's world God's way (which as we saw last week is to model ourselves after Jesus).

This was a powerful statement for a conquered people living in Babylon to make. As you can imagine, they were at the bottom of the pyramid, so-to-speak. They were living in a culture of ducks, being told every day that they were slaves, that they had been *created* to be slaves. The Babylonian creation story justified their oppression. It justified the rich living in the lap of luxury while most of the population scraped by slaving away for them.

But the Jewish people knew that's not who they really were. They knew they were swans, created not as slaves for God, but in God's image. They knew that every person bears God's image, that no one should be oppressed by anyone else.

The Jewish creation story made their little community a light in the midst of a dark culture. They shined the light of God's truth into a culture who was living by a false story, a slave-making story. The Genesis story proclaimed the freedom of God to everyone around them.

So what do we do with that today? Because none of us is living in captivity in Babylon. In fact, the vast majority of us probably didn't know or care that a long-dead empire even *had* a creation story, and I doubt we're going to lose any sleep over it tonight.

But we are still surrounded by what we could call competing creation stories today. Not necessarily creation stories in the sense of telling us where we came from. But consider again the real argument that Genesis and Babylon were having: it wasn't really over how we got here. Both stories agree that a god made us. The stories are really arguing over *purpose*. WHY were we created? What's the purpose or the goal of our lives?

Genesis teaches us we should be very attentive to the stories our culture tells us, the stories trying to shape us. So what are some of those stories?

There's a scientific story that says humans are simply animals, a random organization of matter into atoms and molecules.

Please don't here me say that a Christian should be anti-science. God knows we've got a long track record of that. But the Church of the Nazarene has an intentionally broad confessional statement regarding creation. To be clear: you can believe that God created the world in six literal days and be a Nazarene. And you can also believe that God used the natural mechanism of evolution to create life on Earth and be a Nazarene. (I think you can believe aliens created life on Earth as long as you believe God sent the aliens.) Here at Beavercreek Nazarene, you can disagree with someone with regard to their beliefs about the mechanism of creation. But if they believe that whatever the mechanism, God is the ultimate creator, then you are welcomed under the umbrella of Nazarenes.

So to be clear: some Christians believe God used evolution to create life. That's not the false story I'm talking about. I am talking about a worldview that denies the existence of God, that claims everything we know came to exist apart from God. That there's no Way, no Logic, no Order to the world or to humanity, that we're just animals that figured out how to use tools.

That's a materialist worldview. There's no objective ground for morality. No actual difference between a person or a potato or plastic bottle. They're all just arrangements of atoms. Instincts are good and trustworthy, and as long as you're not hurting anyone else, you should follow them.

And that's not the only story out there. We could talk about the American Dream, a story that tells us what makes us human is hard work and productivity. Our joy, our fulfillment comes from acquiring more, working harder, building a bigger life.

That's a worldview that worships productivity: a big house, fat bank account, successful business and crammed calendar are all hallmarks of success. What matters most is achievement, and everything - health, family, sanity, other people - can be sacrificed to get ahead.

The advertising world tells us Consumerist creation stories. It's trying to form us into a particular kind of person: one that buys buys buys. Advertising promises us that a particular product will make us happy, give us the life we think we want. Everything from cars to vacations to orange juice to fast food assaults us with promises that what our story's really missing is the happy ending they can provide.

And in the midst of all this, we have the story of the Scriptures. That we were created by the same God that made the world. That this God has a way, an Order we should choose to follow if we want our lives to have meaning.

And as we saw last week, that Way is Jesus. When we look at Jesus, we see who we are supposed to be. When Jesus was asked how he would summarize God's Way, he said,

The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these. -- Mark 12:29-31 (NLT)

If we wanted to sloganize Jesus' Way, we could say simply, Love God. Love People. That's God's Way, God's Order for our lives in the simplest nutshell possible. We can and will spend the rest of our lives unpacking those four simple words, but that's a great picture of what it looks like to be the image of God.

That's how to live like a swan when everyone else is telling you you're some kind of duckling.

What story are you living? Ask yourself, What are my priorities? If someone were to look at my life and take a guess at what the goal is, at what I'm trying to be, what would they say?

I can tell you the story I fall for all the time: the Productivity Myth. I catch myself all the time thinking if I just work a few more hours, meet with a few more people, write a few hundred more words, read a few more books or blog posts, I'll finally have it figured out. Finished.

I constantly have to remind myself to shut my computer, put away my phone, not go into the office when it's time to be away. And I learn the same lesson every time:

Somehow, when I choose people over productivity, when I choose my wife over my work, the world has yet to quit spinning.

What about you? What false stories do you tend to buy into? What are you trying to be? All-star employee? Parent-of-the-year? Friend-who-doesn't-say-no?

Maybe you're not getting your story from our culture. Maybe you're living under labels a parent or spouse or friend puts on you. You're dumb. Or not-good-enough. Or try-a-little-harder.

Maybe you're living in a story of mistakes you've made. You're used-up. Or Failure.

There are thousands of false stories out there - some as big as a worldview and some as small as one person's baggage.

But there's only one True Story of who you are. And it goes like this:

In the beginning... God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like ourselves..." So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

You want to know what God says you are? You are the image-bearer of God. You were created to Love God and Love People. Just listen to what Jesus tells anyone who would follow him:

There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. -- John 15:13-15 (NLT)

You're not a slave. Who you are isn't defined by the false stories you've heard about who you are. You bear the image of the God who has set you free from every kind of slavery.

You're not just an animal. Who you are isn't just a particular arrangement of atoms. You bear the image of the God who created you and calls you to be fully human.

You're not a consumer. Who you are isn't defined in what you've accumulated. You bear the image of the God who gave you every good gift, that you might always be satisfied in God alone.

You're not a producer. Who you are isn't bound up in what you accomplish. You bear the image of the God who rested after the work of creation.

You're not a failure. Who you are isn't defined by the mistakes you've made. You bear the image of the God who brings life from death, victory from failure.

You're not a duckling. The reason the story you're living doesn't feel right, the reason it never seems to fulfill you, the reason it doesn't quite fit, is because it's the wrong story.

You're a swan. You are the child and friend of God. Your creator loves you and crafted you for a purpose. That purpose is a rich, full, meaningful, excessive life. And that life is the life of Love God,

Love People. That's our story. It comes from the beginning of our Scriptures and is affirmed over and over and over throughout the whole Bible.

Communion Setup

There could be no better way to celebrate God's story than by sharing in the Communion Meal. This meal represents to us Jesus' death. Jesus told us that no one has greater love than to lay down your life for a friend. So to accept Jesus' invitation, to come to this table, to share in his meal, is the ultimate evidence that God has called you a friend, and demonstrated your value by giving up his own life to call you back to who you were created to be.

When we eat this bread, it symbolizes Jesus' body, broken for all of us who've been broken by the false stories we believe.

When we dip the bread in this grape juice, it symbolizes Jesus' blood, poured out that we might see the Love of God for us and know the full measure and power of that love.

Here at Beavercreek Nazarene you don't have to be a member of our church to receive communion. This is Jesus' table, not ours. And today, you may come and share in this meal if you are ready to quit living the false stories you hear every day and live in God's story of who you are.

Benediction

Go into a world that tries to tell you you're an ugly duckling and know that you bear the image of the God who calls you a child and a friend.