

Welcome

An interview with Sue Sweeney about curriculum and the stories we teach

Message

We're in the season of Epiphany! Following our Christmas celebration of God with us, Epiphany asks an important question: who is God? The answer we find in Epiphany is: God is who we meet in Jesus. Another way to say that is: If we want to know who God is, then our very best picture of God is Jesus.

This year, our Epiphany series is called "From A to Z". We're exploring some of the big themes of the Bible, themes that illustrate who God is. As you might expect from the title, we're going to see how these themes show up throughout Scripture. How they reach their fullness in Jesus. And how they help us live today as we anticipate Jesus' return.

In other words, this is a series about how Jesus shows us the God who has been at work from the beginning and will keep working to the very end.

We began last week with the origins of theology: the miracle of life. We saw that because we are relational creatures, we know God to be relational. In Jesus, we meet the God who created us *on purpose, for a purpose*. God desires us to live with God.

Today, we're exploring what we mean when we confess God as our creator. This is one of our oldest beliefs - in our earliest creedal statements, we find "We believe in God the Father, creator of Heaven and Earth." That's a poetic way to say, "creator of everything."

Again, this is a space where a lot of our preconceived baggage rushes in: we hear "God created everything" and we immediately square off for a fight: creation vs evolution. Science vs. faith. Christianity vs atheism.

But as we saw last week, that's not what God-as-creator means. When the Bible talks about God as creator, the Bible isn't concerned primarily with the *material* origin of the world but rather the *purpose* of the world. In other words, not HOW are we here, but WHY are we here?

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Genesis 1. I'm sure it's no surprise that we're going to the beginning of the Bible, to the first creation story, to talk about God as creator. We're going to be in Genesis 1-3 for the next couple of weeks.

What might surprise you, however, is that Genesis 1 is one of at least 4 creation stories in the Bible. There are two right here in Genesis - the poem here in 1 and the story of the Garden in chapters 2-3. But there are also two other major stories. You might be familiar with the end of the book of Job, where God shows up to debate Job. God's defense of Godself is basically a tour through the creation of the world.

The other major creation account is Psalm 104, another poem that celebrates God as creator. Now, here's the really fascinating bit: Genesis 1 is probably the *newest* creation story in the Bible.

I know that sounds weird - especially because Genesis 1 is literally the first thing in the Bible, and it's *about* the beginning of time. So it feels natural to treat it like the oldest thing.

But the Bible is a *library* not a single history book. When you walk into a library, you don't assume that the first book on the shelf is the oldest. We know libraries are arranged by subject, by author and most importantly, by Dewey Decimal Number! So just because a book is *shelved* first doesn't mean it's the oldest.

Same with the Bible. The Bible is (more or less) arranged in order of chronology of *events described* not by *date authored*. So if a book about the American Revolution was written last year, it would come before a book about the Civil War written in the 1980s.

So anyway, back to Genesis 1. One of the really cool things about having (at least) 4 different creation stories in the Bible is it lets us ask, "Why?"

After all, if what was most important was the HOW question - HOW did we get here?, then the people who assembled the Bible would've likely edited it down to a single, authorized story. But they didn't. They left all four in.

Because "HOW" isn't the question they cared about. They wanted to get at WHY - why did God create us? Why does God care about us? Why are we here?

And we have four different takes on that answer.

We're looking at one today: the one in Genesis 1. If you were with us last Summer when Sue Sweeney and I preached on mythology in the Bible, you may remember that Genesis 1 was written as a correction to the Babylonian creation myth. In the Babylonian creation story, Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon, achieves rest for the gods first through combat - he slays Tiamat, the goddess of the deep waters - and then through slavery - he creates humans to work so the gods can rest.

As you might imagine, the Babylonian society built on this myth was both fiercely warmongering and deeply hierarchical. War and slavery were the twin pillars of Babylonian society. You had to fight to get to the top, then fight to stay there.

In contrast, we get this opening to the creation story in Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. -- Genesis 1:1-3

We're tempted, when we read these verses, to fall back on our scientific assumptions. We want to ask, "How?" and read the Big Bang onto this passage. But this isn't about that.

This isn't a story about creating something from nothing. In the beginning wasn't NOTHING, but "formless and empty" - the Hebrew phrase is the poetic *tohu va vohu*. And if we were ancient Hebrews living in Exile in Babylon, we would immediately recognize that phrase. It sounds a lot like the Babylonian word for Tiamat, that goddess of the chaotic seas.

But notice that God doesn't slay the *tohu va vohu*. God doesn't fight it at all. Instead, God *invites*. "Let there be..." and there was. Every day is another step in God's gentle invitation to the chaotic, unformed emptiness to take shape, to become substance. Every day, the mess looks a little more like a place until, by the end of the sixth day, God is ready to fill the world God has invited into being.

God creates two humans in God's own image - that's that relational nature we heard about earlier, and it's only then we see what this whole thing was leading to:

So the creation of the heavens and the earth and everything in them was completed. On the seventh day God had finished his work of creation, so he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because it was the day when he rested from all his work of creation. -- Genesis 2:1-3

Rest! But not just for God - this is the Sabbath day, a day God extends to all creation.

Now, if you're an ancient listener, hearing this creation poem recited, here's where you leap up and go, "Whoa wait a minute... WHAT?!?" Because in the story everyone knows, rest isn't for everyone. It's only for the gods (and the humans who are godlike - kings and priests).

But in *this* story, God designs the world so that *everyone* shares in rest together.

That is... really different.

The God of Israel is a God who creates not by beating the world into submission, but through loving invitation. Invitation to what? To a just, grace-filled rest, a state where everyone has what they need to thrive, together.

God is not Marduk. Israel is not Babylon.

[Scripture Slide 2] We get a glimpse of what this means in some very practical terms in Luke 5. This is early in Jesus' ministry - he's been baptized, fasted in the wilderness for 40 days. He's called his first

disciples and begun a preaching tour in the Galilee region. He's gaining fame quickly, both for his powerful teaching and for his healing.

That has, as might not be a surprise, made the religious leaders in his region jealous. So in this particular story, they've come out to check him out. They've come from all over the region - many probably travelling hours to be here. These are guys who normally would be at each others' throats, arguing about what following God really looks like. But they've all put their differences aside in the face of this new threat (Jesus!?).

The other major players in this story are another group of men who show up carrying their paralyzed friend. We don't know anything about this situation: was the man born paralyzed? Or maybe he was injured in a construction accident. It could be the result of abuse from Roman soldiers. Or maybe he was set upon by bandits while travelling. We have no idea. What we do know is that some men considered him friend enough to literally carry him to meet this popular new rabbi who had a reputation for healing work.

The problem is... thanks to all these religious leaders who've shown up to keep tabs on Jesus, these guys can't get their friend to him. What do they do? Their solution is... a little unorthodox to say the least:

One day while Jesus was teaching, some Pharisees and teachers of religious law were sitting nearby. (It seemed that these men showed up from every village in all Galilee and Judea, as well as from Jerusalem.) And the Lord's healing power was strongly with Jesus.

Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a sleeping mat. They tried to take him inside to Jesus, but they couldn't reach him because of the crowd. So they went up to the roof and took off some tiles. Then they lowered the sick man on his mat down into the crowd, right in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the man, "Young man, your sins are forgiven." -- Luke 5:17-19

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is generous with his good news message. He makes it clear that it's for everyone - echoing the Sabbath Rest invitation in that first creation week. But even though Jesus' invitation is for everyone, not everyone can access Jesus.

It's a deep irony that it's religious leaders who block the way to Jesus. Yet that remains all too true in our day. Plenty of religious leaders - pastors, deacons, parents and more have taken it on ourselves to decide who is worthy of Jesus' invitation and who isn't.

We've formed barriers to Jesus, our backs to the world, preventing those seeking healing from connecting with their creator.

Thank God we have in this story the man's friends - people desperate enough not to let the gatekeepers stop them. They climbed onto the roof and literally tore it off. When the gatekeepers were blocking the way, they went 3-D on them.

So as we move toward a time of reflection, I want to invite you to consider who you might be in this story:

Are you the religious leaders, so concerned about truth that you're keeping out those God has invited in? Today is a good day to stop and reflect on why your back is to a world that Jesus loves.

Are you the man who can't get to Jesus on his own? Friends there is so much pain in this world - so many ways we're made to feel God doesn't love us, or that God's love is conditional. This isn't true. God is our creator, which means that God invites us all to flourish.

Maybe... just maybe... some of us might be those friends. We know who Jesus is, and we want our friends to know him, to receive his invitation. And we see the gatekeepers, the folks who stand with their backs to the world, making it their job to decide who's worthy of God's invitation and who's not.

May we be the ones who outfox the gatekeepers, the ones who go 3-D. Those who tear off roofs if that's what it takes.

Because God created us all in God's own image. And God invites us all to live in that peace-filled rest with God and with one another.

As Jesus showed us, this is an invitation open to all, if we'll receive it.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We feast with Jesus

1. Where in the last week have I experienced peace and assurance?
2. Where in the last week have I been anxious, afraid or conflicted?
3. Where in the week ahead of me will I encounter pain, anxiety or fear?
4. How can I be an agent of God's peace and flourishing this week?

Assignment + Blessing