

## Genesis 1 – Mark 1 – “Baptism of our Lord” 2024

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Genesis 1 is a love story – Creation is a love story.<sup>1</sup>

But it is an understated love, a shy love, disclosed along the way, a love only known when encountered.

God, the Thoughtful One, appears in Genesis 1 without a history, without a biography; no bragging heralds this One's devoted shaping of words and worlds.

God the Artisan makes everything that is, heaven and earth. There is nothing that God does not make.

And then God pauses. The Thoughtful One lingers, as Spirit hovering over chaotic waters. God is at home in the disorder, in the yet-to-be-formed places. The watery chaos is the dormant rumblings of the world waiting to be brought graciously to abundance.

The Softly Spoken One then speaks, “Let there be light”.

The music begins, the song of creation.<sup>2</sup> God said to Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ... when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”<sup>3</sup>

This music is continuously unfolded by grace and without necessity by the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit, eternally communing in shared joy and delight.

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And so the Softly Spoken One weaves creation threads on the loom of a seven day week, a deep and profound metaphorical structure of beginnings and middles and ends, seasons and rhythms.

Day One is wrought of spoken light; it is bathed in luminosity, a radiance of pure goodness, separated from darkness so that day and night might alternate

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<sup>1</sup> The opening reflection on Genesis I have published in Anstey, M. P. 2017, “‘And God Saw it was Good’: The Creation of Wellbeing and the Wellbeing of Creation” in *Flourishing in Faith: Theology encountering Positive Psychology*, G. Ambler, M. Anstey, M. White, & T. McCall (eds). Cascade Publications, pp. 55–64.

<sup>2</sup> An analogy that came to be known as *musica mundana* or *harmonia mundi*. I am indebted to Hart, *The beauty of the infinite*, pp. 275ff for the elaboration of this idea.

<sup>3</sup> Job 38:4, 7.

as the world's metronome, evening and morning, evening and morning, evening and morning.

Day Two is a Sky-making Day, a Sky given to separate water from water, above from below.

Day Two then gives to Day Three the waters below the Sky, to be separated further into Land and Sea.

And God sees the goodness of all these places: Light, Sky, Land, and Sea.

But Day Three is not finished. God says to the Land, I have granted you your place. Now you can give of yourself, by bringing forth plants and trees, and they in turn can share their seed and fruit. Giving spawns more giving. God creates spaces which in turn create life.

From Day 3 onwards, *the world partakes in its own creation.*

By granting such reproductive potential to the world, God, as pure love, does not insist on getting God's own way.<sup>4</sup>

So Days 1–3 progress through the creation of Light, Sky, Land and Sea. And from here, Days 4–6 receive these gifted spaces of Days 1–3 and fill each in turn with its indigenous members.

In medieval exegesis days 1-3 were called *opus distinctionis*, 'the work of separation' and days 4-6 were called *opus ornatus*, 'the work of embellishment.'<sup>5</sup> In modern parlance: *God-directed separation leads to God-blessed saturation.*

Day Four receives the Light space and fills it with sun and moon and quasars, supernovas and shooting stars. These lights bestow their own gift, for they determine days and months and years. The simple beat of morning and evening is overlaid with the syncopated rhythms of tides and years, winter and summer, spring and autumn.

Day Five receives the Sea space and God populates it with swarming creatures, plankton and sea snakes, coral and starfish. The Thoughtful One then fills the Sky space with flying creatures, kestrels and hawks, finches and nightingales.

Day Six receives the Earth space, dappled by the gift of fruitful vegetation, and God fills it with animals galore, rhinos and echidnas, llamas and water buffalos.

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 13:5, Love does not insist on its own way.

<sup>5</sup> Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, 2005, p.76 n. 89.

And then, *a paradox at creation's zenith*. God, the One with no image, gives God's image to humankind. (Humans are on the "frontier"<sup>6</sup> between the physical and spiritual.<sup>7</sup>)

Humans are blessed and released to thrive and permeate the world.

After all is created, God says to humankind, "Look! I *give* you everything."

Creation is through and through sheer gift.<sup>8</sup>

The Softly Spoken One, having declared all of creation *very good*, then rests on Day Seven, and listens in on the ongoing melodies of a world fully prepared to sing God's song forever.

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Creation thus provides an entire worldview, moving from the beautiful to the good to the true.<sup>9</sup>

The artistry of creation and creation's Artist entails firstly *aesthetics*, the call to further beauty in whatever ways we can, be it in farming or face-painting, philosophy or finance.<sup>10</sup>

Art, in all its manifold senses, is not a sideshow (or distraction) to the supposed main game of saving souls and preparing ourselves for bliss on the far side. It is not a holiday house we retreat to occasionally from work-driven lives; instead, the artistic life is the whole of life lived in step with the rhythm of God's joy.

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<sup>6</sup> The *methorios* in patristic language.

<sup>7</sup> "the priesthood of creation that unites earth to heaven." David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the tsunami?*, Eerdmans, 2005, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> A dress rehearsal, one might say, for the gift of Christ's *kenosis*.

<sup>9</sup> This follows the order of Balthasar's reversal of Immanuel Kant's three critiques. Immanuel Kant, 1787, 2d ed., *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1788 *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1790 *Critique of Judgement*. Hans Urs von Balthasar reversed this in *The Glory of the Lord* (7 vols), *Theo-Drama* (5 vols), and *Theo-Logic* (4 vols).

<sup>10</sup> Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, p.74 writes "Superimposed on and integrated with the picture of God speaking creation into being is the metaphor of God as designer and artificer, constructing with care, attention, obvious pleasure, and self-investment (as a good artist) a coherent, harmoniously functioning cosmos, according to a well-thought out plan. This characterisation of God as maker or artisan is rhetorically embedded in the superb literary artistry of the creation story."

To be God's beautiful image entails a way of living in which all our speech and activity intertwine together in a flawless integrity that furthers beauty, mimicking God's integrity. Creation thus entails, in the second place, *ethics*.

In this imitation of God, we come to participate in "letting be", in "letting others be fruitful," because love lets go and delights in the particular beauty of the other in and of itself.

Finally, the beautiful and the good are incomplete without *the true*.<sup>11</sup>

Hence the beautiful, the good, and the true, are *intrinsic* to the very fabric of the universe that God freely gives us in creation.

*This* is story of the creation – the *genesis* – of each person. The ground of our being is *not* total depravity or original sin, but original blessing. Unfortunately, many Christians have been so zealous in denouncing our wretchedness that they have forgotten that sin is only meaningful as a falling away from the good, a wound to be healed.

Genesis 1 locates us in a world where jazz and justice are as natural as breathing and eating, a world where soul-care and neighbourhood-care are the way of life for God's image-bearers.

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The Gospel writers, each in their own distinctive way, continue this story.

John 1 continues this story with his astonishing claim:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

What surprises us is that John uses *creation* language to explain the *Incarnation*.

Before the world exists, the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word is both God and distinct from God. The Word and God are in *relationship*. And from this *relationship* all things are made by the Word.

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<sup>11</sup> Hart, *The beauty of the infinite: The aesthetics of Christian truth*, p. 132. "Truth is ultimately aesthetic, ... a unity of form and message, having no separable essence or content for dialectic to pry loose." David Bentley Hart writes: "Beauty is the beginning and end of all true knowledge: really to know anything, one must first love, and having known, one must finally delight; only this corresponds to the trinitarian love and delight that creates."

The creation happens because the Logos is turned joyfully towards and centred in God. This Logos is *life and light*, and the Light shines – present tense – *in the darkness*.<sup>12</sup>

So what does this Logos look like?

Well, nothing prepares us for what John writes in verse 14: “And the Word became flesh” – flesh! What do you think of when I say the word flesh! Bodily functions, sexuality, finiteness, frailty, foibles.<sup>13</sup>

*the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth.*

The glory of God is the beauty and magnificence of God, and is seen in the Word as flesh.

The full significance and weightiness and importance of God is revealed in *flesh*. In a poor, Jewish peasant – who like us was once a 4 year old with tantrums, who went through puberty, who caught colds.

What we take to be the great *limits* of human life – our desires, our needs, our sexuality, our dying and decay, our limited perspective – these limits are fully able to reveal who God is.

*This* enfleshed Word is the clearest revelation of who God is.

*This* Logos in DNA is the glory of God. The good, the true, and the beautiful have been revealed as the Light, the Logos, and the Glory of God.

So, what does this mean for creation? It means that..

*this world*, this physics and chemistry and biology,

*this world*, with all its contingency and subjectivity and materiality,

can and has in fact revealed the *full glory of God*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> God does not abandon humanity in its struggle with the darkness. Rather, God becomes flesh to join us in the struggle. Not so God could learn something or achieve something in becoming human, but to reveal God’s glory and truth and grace. The darkness that is hinted at in Genesis 1 is shone into and encompassed and dispersed by the Son of God.

<sup>13</sup> The Logos entered human life subject to all the conditions of human existence.

The background is Isaiah 40:6 “All flesh is grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.”

<sup>14</sup> This is Jesus’ world, made for him and by him. The world is literally good enough for us because it is good enough for Jesus.

And from this flows a vital conclusion: *the incarnation is an unconditional affirmation of creation and its beauty, truth, and goodness, because creation is fully able to reveal God's glory.*

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In Mark's Gospel, for today, creation language is also invoked:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Can you hear the echoes?

- "a wind of God swept over the waters" – "the Spirit of God descending on Jesus, coming up out of the water"
- And God said, "Let there be light" – and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved"
- And God saw all that God had made and it was good – "with you I am well pleased"

What the gospel writers discerned, and what the early church theologians further fill out, is that in the birth of Jesus, the entire creation is being renewed. This culminates in the resurrection, about which the Orthodox church teaches that the entire cosmos emerged from the empty tomb.

In creation, in incarnation, in resurrection, what is being asserted is that *This world* has everything God needs to bring its full renewal.

In the creation, in the incarnation, in the resurrection we see God's seal of approval on this world, warts and all.

The project of creation, despite the darkness, cannot be thwarted, because God is committed without reserve to the fulfilment of creation's promise of wholeness and *shalom*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Douglas John Hall, "the cross of Christ marks, in a decisive and irrevocable way, the unconditional participation of God in the life of the world, ... the commitment of God to the fulfilment of creation's promise." *The Cross in Our Context*, p. 35. Not only is it an affirmation of this world, but more astonishingly, it is an affirmation of *humanity*. God will go so far as to die to restore us, the wayward lover, the lost friend, the alienated covenant partner (p.93).

What does this mean for human life? It means, as David Bentley Hart says, that the true story of the world, lost in the seemingly endless epic of sin, has been retold by Christ in the entire motion and content of his life.<sup>16</sup>

The human story is finally told by Jesus, the image of God, in the way promised in creation, in all its truth, goodness, and beauty.

It is finally told in the way we have each failed to tell it, without violence, without sin, without hubris, *yet in the midst of darkness*.

Hence the truth, beauty, and goodness of creation is finally able to be pursued without being thwarted by the threat of oblivion. The darkness continues, but death has lost its sting. We can now live through baptism as those already dead to sin and alive to God.

God *saves* us, therefore, so we can be fully *responsible*, fully *authentic*, fully *participating* in God's yearning for the wholeness of all things.<sup>17</sup>

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Hence despite the defacing of sin, our calling, our vocation, our mission to work with God to bring wholeness to all things, can be pursued with confidence. It is our story because it is God's story.

Salvation plunges us fully fleshed into the *renewal* of all creation by the Spirit. And when Jesus returns in the Eschaton this renewal will be complete.

The judgement of God at the end of time will then vindicate the judgment of creation – "God saw all that God had made and it was very good."

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<sup>16</sup> Adapted from David Bentley Hart: "Because the true story of the world has been lost in the seemingly endless epic of sin, Christ must retell – in the entire motion and content of his life ... – the tale from the beginning." (p. 325).

<sup>17</sup> Douglas John Hall puts it this way: "God calls us as creatures to a life of extraordinary responsibility, and 'salvation' implies reclaiming that responsibility." P. 247 *ibid*. Also p. 108 "Justification is the righting of the human person so that he or she will behave humanly – will become, so to speak, himself or herself."

And so to conclude, God's first and final judgement that *the world is good* means that:

Creation contains everything God needs to fashion the world.

Creation contains everything God needs to become fully united with creation while remaining God.

Creation, wounded though it is, contains everything God needs to fashion the new heavens and the new earth from the inside out.

*To put it simply – “this world is beloved of God and must not be abandoned.”<sup>18</sup>*

***“this world is beloved of God and must not be abandoned.”***

Creation – Incarnation – Crucifixion – Resurrection – Eschaton.

This is the singular, infinite, outpouring of God's love. And together, its testimony is unequivocal:

God is trustworthy and worthy of all glory, honour, and praise. Amen.

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<sup>18</sup> DJH, p. 220. *Ibid*, said there in relation to the message of the cross.