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Genesis 1:2-13

Second Message

Bernard Bell

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LIGHTEN OUR DARKNESS

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Few chapters of the Bible are as controversial as the very first chapter. I avoided the controversy last week by staying in the safety of the first half of the first verse. But I can't stay there forever; I do have to venture out into the minefield of the six days of creation. I know that I will not please all of you here with what I have to say about these days. So polarized is the debate over this first chapter that I think it impossible for anyone to preach through it without offending one side or another.

How are we to read Genesis 1? What sort of literature is it? Is it history or myth? Is it to be taken literally or literarily? Let me first make some comments about the literary features of Genesis in general and of chapter 1 in particular. You'll have to judge whether these comments calm or stir up the waters.

The book of Genesis is structured into ten major sections by a heading that occurs ten times: "This is the account of..." (NIV, TNIV) or "These are the generations of..." (KJV, NASB, ESV). These ten accounts are readily divided into two sets of five. The first five cover primeval history (2:4-11:26). The second five cover patriarchal history (11:27-50:26). In each set of five, the odd accounts are narratives and the even accounts are shorter genealogies. In the first set the accounts of the heavens and the earth, of Noah and of Shem are interleaved with the genealogies of Adam and the sons of Noah. In the second set, the longer narratives of Terah, Isaac and Jacob are interleaved with the shorter genealogies of Ishmael and Esau. In this series we will cover the first five accounts, the primeval history.

The first account doesn't begin until 2:4. Genesis 1:1-2:3 stands outside the main structure of the book. It serves as an introduction to the whole book—one might say to the whole Bible. Chapter divisions were added to the Bible only in the thirteenth century (by Stephen Langton in 1227). They were added for convenience in referencing the Bible. Chapter divisions do not always coincide with logical divisions within the text. The very first chapter division is wrong. Whenever I refer to chapter 1 please assume I am including the first three verses of chapter 2.

The opening creation story is not to be read the same way as the ten accounts. Four of the accounts are genealogies; the other six are narratives that employ standard Hebrew narrative style. Language-wise there is nothing to distinguish the patriarchal narratives from the primeval narratives. The narrative expects me to take Abraham, Jacob and Joseph as historical, and likewise to take Adam and Noah as historical. There is nothing in the Hebrew style that would allow me to accept the second five accounts as historical and the first five accounts as non-historical.

But Genesis 1 is different. It is narrative but it is narrative that is so crafted that it is half-way to poetry. I'm a little old-fashioned in my understanding of what constitutes poetry. It is not prose with random carriage returns inserted. I'm struck by the first definition given on dictionary.com: poetry is "the art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasure by beautiful, imagina-

tive, or elevated thoughts." That certainly applies to this chapter. It has rhythm, pattern and structure. We should therefore read it as poetry not as narrative. When we read a good poem we savor the words, we appreciate the structure, we feel the beat of the meter, we delight in the word plays. We feel a poem in a way that is not true of a narrative. If you reduce this chapter to straight narrative then you misread it; you won't feel it as it should be felt. I will elaborate on this when we look at the days themselves.

So, Genesis 1 stands outside the general structure of the book, and it is not to be read as straightforward narrative, but as poetry.

This first section of Genesis has five sections:

1. summary statement (1:1)
2. initial state of the earth (1:2)
3. the six days of creation (1:3-31)
4. another summary statement (2:1)
5. epilogue about the seventh day (2:2-3).

Today we'll look at the initial state and the first three days

Summary statement (1:1)

The chapter opens with a summary statement:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen 1:1 TNIV)

This is balanced by a concluding summary statement:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. (2:1)

"The heavens and the earth" is a merism for the entire cosmos. We're simply told that God created it all.

I said last week that these early chapters of Genesis can be read as a polemic against the stories of the surrounding cultures. These chapters were given to Israel as their account of origins over against the stories of the Babylonians, Canaanites and Egyptians. These accounts typically contain three elements: theogony: creation of the gods and the invisible realm they occupy; cosmogony: creation of the visible, physical world; and the creation of mankind.

The most famous of these accounts is the Babylonian *Enuma elish*. It opens with a theogony: from the intermingling of pre-existent Apsu (fresh water) and Tiamat (salt water) were born six gods, the last being Ea (subterranean fresh water). When these gods disturbed Apsu's rest he plotted to kill them, but Ea killed him and then fathered Marduk (storm). Now Tiamat found her rest disturbed by the gods and plotted to kill them, appointing Kingu as her commander, but Marduk killed her and captured Kingu. The account proceeds to cosmogony: Marduk sliced Tiamat in half and created the cosmos from the two halves of her body. Finally, humans were created at Marduk's suggestion in order to relieve the gods of their labor; Kingu was killed and humans were made from his blood.

This sounds a little confusing and chaotic, and it is. The *Enuma elish* expresses how the Babylonians understood their world. Their spiritual world was inhabited by multiple gods who were at war with each other; these gods were capricious and unpredictable. The physical world was birthed out of conflict between good and evil; there was no guarantee that good would prevail. Finally humans were created to do the grunt work for the gods. Only the king had a special status. Such creation stories shaped how people saw everything: themselves, other people, the king, their world and their gods. With such cosmologies the world is a scary, unpredictable place. You have to placate the gods with sacrifices to get them onto your side. With the exception of the king, humans have no dignity.

How different is the Genesis account! There is no theogony. Instead, “In the beginning God.” Though evil will intrude into the world, it is not a divine force equal and opposite to god. There is no primeval struggle between good and evil. Some of our understandings of Satan come dangerously close to this view: we magnify the power and status of Satan. No, he is not an equal and opposite force to God. The cosmos came into being because God created it as a free act of his love and pleasure. Not because he had to, nor as a result of conflict, but because he wanted to.

The Initial state (1:2)

The summary statements in 1:1 and 2:1 present the creation of an ordered and filled cosmos. There is no chaos or conflict here. But they do not describe how God did that. Verses 2-31 give a poetic account of the making of the ordered and filled cosmos. It begins with the initial state:

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (1:2)

Here the earth must mean the planet plus all the surrounding space, the entire visible, physical cosmos. We are not told how this came into being; this is presumably covered under God’s creation of heaven and earth. But we are told of the initial state in a three-fold statement. The earth was formless and void, the artful Hebrew phrase *tohu wa-bohu*. The earth was formless: it had no structure. It was void: it had no contents. Formless, it was uninhabitable; void, it was uninhabited.

This is not a state subsequent to verse 1: that the whole cosmos was created but then became formless and void, degenerating into chaos. This so-called gap theory was popularized by the notes in the Scofield Bible. It assumes a lengthy gap between verses 1 and 2, which became a convenient dumping ground for all manner of things that didn’t fit elsewhere including the dinosaurs and the fall of Satan. The gap theory has no merit at all; verse 2 cannot be translated, “The earth became...” Verse 2 describes the initial blank state rather than a subsequent negative state.

The second statement tells us that two elements were present: darkness and the deep. Perhaps we should describe these as non-elements, as nothings, for in the Biblical view darkness is the absence of light and the deep is the absence of safe land. Both represent absence of formation. Once the earth has been formed, both represent reversion to unformation, descent into disorder. In Canaanite mythology darkness and sea are malevolent forces, evil deities threatening to overwhelm the world. Here they are simply initial states of uncreation which flee at God’s command.

The third statement tells us that God’s Spirit was already present hovering over the waters of the deep, as a mother bird hovers over the young in her nest, ready to execute God’s purposes.

Here then is the initial state at the start of the six days of creation: formless and void. In six days God will reverse this state: in the first three days he will form the cosmos; in the second three days he will fill it.

The first three days (1:3-31)

The bulk of chapter 1 is the recital of the six days of creation. The language here is poetic, highly structured, artful. The most obvious structure is the six days themselves. There is a rhythm to these verses. Each day follows a similar pattern with six elements:

1. divine command: “Then God said”
2. the resultant act
3. statement of fulfillment: “And it was so”
4. naming: “Then God called”
5. evaluation: “Then God saw that it was good”
6. conclusion: “and there was evening and there was morning, the *n*th day.”

This rhythm is obvious to all. But the text has a much richer texture to it. These six days form two triads, each of three days. The various rhythmic elements are distributed across these six days in a highly significant manner.

Ten times we read, “Then God said:” once on the first day of each set of three days, once again on the second day, then twice on day three and four times on day six. God fashions the world in eight creative acts: one on each of the first two days and two on the third day of each set. There are seven statements of fulfillment: once on the first day, once on the second day, and twice on the third day of each set—except that the statement is omitted on day two of the second set, to achieve a seven-fold statement of fulfillment. Likewise there are seven statements that God saw that it was good: once on the first day, once on the second day, and twice on the third day of each set, except that this time the number seven is obtained by omitting the statement on day two of the first set. Finally, it is only in the first set of three days that God names what he had made; in the second set this element is omitted because God will delegate that task to the human.

So, ten words, seven declarations of fulfillment, seven declarations of goodness, two similar sets of three days. This is not a normal narrative. These rhythmic repetitions carry meaning, for of course seven and ten are highly significant numbers, symbolic of fullness, completion, perfection. We should not read this as a scientific text book. We should read it as we do a poem, rolling it around and around on our lips and in our mind. Its imaginative beauty should excite pleasure.

Listen, therefore, as I read the account of the first three days:

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day. (1:3-13)

God spoke his world into being using ten words. On the first day he said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. This is creation by divine fiat (Lat. *fiat* “let it be”). The Hebrew Bible has an exalted view of God’s word. The New Testament has an even more exalted view, recognizing that the word is the Son. God creates through his word; God creates through his Son. Here again we are on holy ground as we explored last week.

The drama of God speaking light into a dark world is well-captured in Haydn’s *Creation*. It opens with the orchestral “Representation of Chaos.” Then, after a recitative, the chorus sings pianissimo, “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said: Let there be light, And there was...” At this moment both orchestra and chorus explode into fortissimo on the word “LIGHT.” It’s a very dramatic moment. It captures the sense of what it must have been like in the beginning as into darkness God suddenly speaks light and everything changes.

I can’t make things this way. I’ve spent much of the past two weeks working on our house. The house doesn’t take shape at my command. I’ve been rewiring the house; Friday I had the power off until 6 p.m. As darkness fell at 5 p.m. I wished I could have said, “Let there be light.” But I can’t. I had to struggle on in the gloom and darkness, till I could finally turn on the master breaker at 6 p.m. But God can. He speaks and it happens. He says, “Let it be,” and it is. How? I don’t know. Genesis 1 doesn’t tell me, and I really have no capacity for knowing.

People ask, “How could there be light on day one if the sun, moon and stars are not created until day four?” This is the wrong question to ask: those who ask it are trying to read the chapter as a science book. Theologically there is no difficulty, for at the end there will be no need for sun or moon, yet the light will be more radiant than ever, for God himself is that light and the Lamb is the lamp (Rev 21:23). The question is, “Why does the creation account allocate light to the first set of days and the light-bearing bodies to the second set?” Light is part of the forming of the world; the light-bearing bodies are part of the filling of the world. Biblically there is much more to light than the photons emitted by the sun and reflected by the moon. Light is a metaphor for order, darkness for disorder.

In speaking light into darkness God speaks order. If you read Genesis 1 as a science book, just in terms of photons, you’ll miss this. God continues this ordering on days two and three. On day two he speaks into place a firmament, expanse or vault, separating the waters above from those below; he names the vault “sky.” On day three the waters flee at his command so that dry land emerges; he separates the two realms which he names “land” and “sea.”

In a second creative act on the third day God commands the vegetation. Again people ask, “How can there be vegetation before the sun enables photosynthesis?” Again, it’s the wrong question! The

question is, “Why does our poet put the vegetation in the first set of days not the second set?” Plants are viewed as part of the structure of the world rather than of its contents; they are part of the structure that enables life.

In four acts on three days God forms a world that started unformed. He gives it structure, shape, order. As Haydn’s *Creation* puts it in the aria after the recitative on day 1: “Confusion yields, and order shines most fair.” That’s what God is up to: bringing order most fair. Darkness and the waters yield before his word.

What about these days? How long are they? Advocates of “twenty-four hours” point out that this is the natural meaning of the word “day” (*yom*). “Day-age” advocates appeal to the statement that a day is like a thousand years in the Lord’s sight (Ps 90:4; 2 Pet 3:8). I know that here there are advocates of both positions. So what do I say? People want to know where I stand on this issue. I say, “A plague on both houses!” Both are trying to read this chapter as a science book. Both misread Scripture. Let “day” stand as “day” and read this as poetry.

Am I a young-earth six-day creationist or an old-earth evolutionist? Again, I know that both are present here. But again, wrong question! Genesis 1 is not written to present a young-earth six-day creationist position nor an old-earth evolutionist position. Both sides misuse it by reading it as a science book.

I am interested in the work of the Institute of Creation Research in San Diego and a few years ago I brought in an ICR speaker. I am glad that there are PhD scientists doing research within a creationist framework, as long as their science is good science. But I do object to reading Genesis 1 as a science book.

On the other hand there are people here interested in the old-earth day-age positions of people like Hugh Ross. But I dislike the way that they too are reading Genesis 1 as a science book and trying to make it fit into their framework.

Let me say a few words about science. It is important to distinguish three elements: facts, interpretations and presuppositions. Facts or data cannot be denied; if they are wrong they are not really facts or data. We say, “Just the facts, ma’am,” but that’s a myth. Rarely are we content with mere facts; rarely are they what we actually want to know. As inquisitive creatures we seek explanations. Interpretations are greatly influenced by the presuppositions we bring to the facts. Evolution is not a fact, though evolutionists frequently insist that it is; it is an interpretation, albeit a widely accepted one. It is the best interpretation of the data for those who hold certain presuppositions; indeed it is the only acceptable interpretation for those who hold certain presuppositions. But we have to admit that certain processes seem clear on the micro-level: adaptation, survival of the fittest, natural selection. The biotech industry, which has a major presence here in the Bay Area, and in which a number of people in this congregation work, depends upon these things happening. But at the macro-level things are a lot more sketchy.

Among my own presuppositions that I bring to bear in thinking about this are “In the beginning God,” “faith seeking understanding” and that Genesis 1 is not a science book. What is needed on both sides is a major dose of humility. Evolutionists need to admit that they are far from a complete explanation, that there are many oddities that don’t fit. Creationists need to read Genesis 1 with humble wonder rather than shrilly insist on its incorporation into school curricula as a scientific text.

I don't know how God made the world. I seek understanding, but I do so from a position of faith—that's a basic presupposition.

So if I don't see Genesis 1 as a science book, what do I see when I read the first three days as poetry? I see that God brings order to his world and does so by his word. Why do I believe that he did this in the beginning? Because I see him continuing to do this throughout history, speaking order into chaos, light into darkness, form into formlessness, and doing so by his word.

In the prologue to John's gospel, Jesus is portrayed as both the word and the light. Jesus was God's final prophet whom he sent to his people, but he was also the word proclaimed. He was both messenger and message. Into a world of darkness God sent his Son as the light. But the world preferred to live in darkness and put out that light. Nevertheless, God continues to send his light into the world, not allowing darkness to prevail. What a great word "nevertheless" is. Even though the world put out the light, *nevertheless* God continues to shine light into this world through his Spirit, bringing the resurrection life of his Son to broken, disordered, deformed lives.

In 1984 Gordon McDonald wrote a book, *Ordering your Private World*, after his own world fell apart. It touched a nerve in people, selling over a million copies. People are looking for order; they want their lives to be formed. They sense that all is not well, that there is chaos and disorder within. God doesn't promise us life, liberty and happiness. But he is at work shining light into darkness, speaking order into disorder, bring form to formlessness.

God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

God who first shone light into darkness on day one now shines the light of his Son into our lives through his Spirit. Notice that in our window the sun in the first bay and the dove in the third bay are at the same level. I did this in order to draw attention to this parallel. But that light goes beyond us, as God shines his light through us into the world beyond, represented by the globe at the bottom of the third bay. Jesus is the Light of the world, but we also are now the light of the world through whom God is shining his light, both here in Cupertino and throughout the world.

There is more yet to come. In the first three days God spoke into existence a formed, ordered, structured world. Starting with just darkness and the deep, his word drove back the darkness and the waters as order emerged. The darkness and sea remained, though on the periphery. Within this world there is now space and time. There is spatial separation (waters above and below; land and sea), and there is temporal separation (day and night). God is content for it to be so: this was all good, yea very good. But it's only an intermediate stage.

In the new heavens and the new earth there will be no more sea, no more darkness (Rev 21:1, 25; 22:5). All will be fully ordered. Space and time as we currently understand them will cease. There will be no more spatial or temporal separation. The story begins with lack of differentiation: all is darkness and waters. It ends with lack of differentiation, but the complete opposite: the darkness and sea have been completely removed.

So I read Genesis 1 not as a science book, but as poetry. As I savor this account I am formed in my understanding of God, of the world, of myself, of others. God is effortlessly sovereign: he speaks and it happens without a struggle. There is no conflict with God. Concerning the world, I see that this world, though disordered now, is yielding to God's ordering. I look forward to the day when all will be ordered. In the meantime, God is speaking order into my life and the lives of people throughout the world. Though we preferred darkness to his light, nevertheless, he is shining his light into our dark hearts. There is no heart so dark that God cannot shine his light into it. There is no life so chaotic and disordered that God cannot speak order into it. There is no personality so deformed that God cannot form it. This what God is up to. This is what he's been doing since the beginning, speaking light, order, formation.

In the Book of Common Prayer there's a wonderful collect as part of Evening Prayer: "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord." That's what God is in the business of doing.

Genesis 1 is not a scientific textbook. It is part of our story of origins. It shapes how we view God, the world, ourselves and others.

We'll close by singing a lovely hymn, *Thou Lovely Source of True Delight*. Its six verses tell the story of a Christian who finds his soul in disarray. In verse 5 he cries out,

Jesus, my Lord, my life, my light
O come with blissful ray
Break radiant through the shades of night
And chase my fears away,
Won't you chase my fears away.

May God do just that through his Son and through his Spirit. May he shine his light into the dark corners of our lives, breaking through with his radiance to chase away our fears, our disorder, our darkness, our formlessness.

[Give] joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:12-14)

*The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)*

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