

I. Advanced organizer - stories of nature

- A. A crazy story came up in my Facebook feed this week. **Inky the octopus' great escape.** Inky was an octopus living in an aquarium in New Zealand. Tank left slightly open, Inky escaped Pixar style through drain pipe back into the sea. Turns out no-one who works with octopi is surprised. Did you know that they're generally known to be escape artists? Combination of super flexible body that can squeeze through tiny holes, a curiosity that likes to explore, and high intelligence that may even include the capacity for mental mapping makes them notoriously hard to keep in captivity.
- B. Random facts about nature: Did you know:
1. Sea otters hold hands while they sleep to keep from drifting apart.
 2. Squirrels plant thousands of new trees each year by simply forgetting where they put their acorns.
 3. Turtles can breathe through their butts.
 4. The longest mountain range in the world is under water. Called the Mid-Oceanic Ridge, this chain of mountains runs through the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and into the Indian and Pacific oceans. It runs more than 35,000 miles long, has peaks higher than those in the Alps and it comprises 23 percent of the Earth's total surface.
 5. Beetles taste like apples, wasps like pine nuts, and worms like fried bacon.
 6. Gentoo penguins propose to their life mates with a pebble.
 7. Oysters can change gender depending on which is best for mating.
 8. Elephants are the only mammals that can't jump.
 9. Seahorses mate for life and when they travel, they hold each other's tails.
 10. Redwood trees, which have been around for thousands of years, back to the time of the dinosaurs, are only found in three places on the planet. Coast Redwoods are along the West Coast between Big Sur and Southern Oregon. Giant Sequoias grow in the Sierras, and the dawn redwood is only found in a remote area of central China.

II. Beauty in Creation - theme for today

- A. Today we're continuing series on Beauty, awe and wonder. **Set up series talking about research that's been done about the power of awe and wonder**, and how that emotion tends to connect us with the broader world around us. Awe makes us more likely to do nice things for other people. One of the primary way this has been studied is **through exposure to beauty in the natural world**. Something about beauty in nature draws awe out of us.
- B. **Coming up on earth day this week; any connection between the goals of Earth Day and our understanding of God's connection to the natural world?** Earth Day was inaugurated in 1970 as a response from environmental scientists and activists to the damage man-made activity was inflicting on the natural world; oil spill in Santa Barbara was a catalyzing event, and so at college campuses across the country rallies were held, protests were organized, and advocacy brought the beginning of change with the forming of Environmental Protection Agency, and passages of legislation like the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act. And while most of us who live in the Bay Area would consider this all to the good, it's also real that there is some controversy in some circles, particularly in some areas of the church, over issues of conservation and our understanding of our role in protecting the environment. There is tension around climate change for some - is it man-made phenomena, is it not. And so we might rightly wonder, how does our theology speak into that question? Maybe it's easier to just keep these two things apart.
- C. Often where this conversation gets off the rails has to do with **how folks read the Bible: specifically two important parts of the story the Bible tells** - polar opposite ends of the story -

1. Beginning of the story - *Creation*: Genesis 1 - if we look to it to explain in a scientifically factual how our natural world came to be it constrains us in certain ways
 2. End of the story - *Eschatology*: the study of “last things”
 3. From of a faith perspective, how you read the beginning and the ends of the story make a difference in how you understand our relationship to the bigger world/universe around us: the cosmos. They also impact how we live in the middle of the story, where we find ourselves today.
- III. Take some time to look at these important places; mostly at the first one **Creation, cause that’s where we often get the most tripped up when considering the natural world and God.**
- A. I have a friend named **Tom Wassink**, some of you have met him. Tom is a pastor, he co-senior pastors a Blue Ocean church in Iowa City, where I served and trained before coming here. But he’s also a Psychiatrist and professor of Psychiatry who specializes in genetic research at the University of Iowa. So...you know. Not your typical resume for a pastor.
 1. getting ready to teach a class at the university for undergrads called “**Darwin and Jesus**”, exploring the relationships between the story the Bible tells and the story science tells, and how that affects our understanding of faith, science, and the world we inhabit. He's also now leading a group at his church on the same premise, and there’s book he’s been recommending that will be required reading for both of these is a book called ***The Lost World of Genesis One*** by John Walton. Got a copy at Berkeley Library. It has a framework for understanding the creation story that begins the bible in a different way than I’ve previously heard, and I found really provocative. I’ll be sharing some of those insights today with you, as well as some of the places they’re leading me as I think about their implications.
 - B. So the premise of the book starts really where all study of the Bible should start - recognizing that **Genesis** like all documents of any kind, and certainly like the texts we’re dealing with in the Bible, are documents that are **written to speak into a particular time, a particular culture, in a particular language**, and the farther removed we are from the text we’re trying to read and interpret and understand, the harder it is for us to actually hear what was being communicated. **Because Genesis wasn’t written to us.** You could maybe say it’s written for us in a sense, but it’s not written to us. It wasn’t written to anyone who’s ever taken even a high school biology because high school biology didn’t exist. It was written to a people who had different understandings of the universe and different questions they were asking of it than our own culture’s questions. And to read it without some humility and some attempt to identify what were the pressing questions for the people this text was meant to speak to, means it’s impossible for us to hear what it’s actually trying to say. And if we actually care about how God speaks to people today through the way he has inspired people to speak in the past, we should care about hearing those people well. And so that’s what John Walton is trying to communicate in the book. He’s trying to help illuminate how a knowledge of the language, a knowledge of the culture, a knowledge of ancient literature tells us about how to read Genesis One.
 - C. I was trying to think of **a good analogy for the way that Walton is pressing his readers to think about the way that Genesis tells the story of creation verses the way that science describe the origins of the universe.** And one that I think might be helpful is considering how we talk to our kids about sex and reproduction. How we answer the question **where do babies come from?** Because ultimately, if we’re good parents who are trying to have honest open relationships with our kids, we’re gonna try to answer the truthfully and honestly, but speaking at a level to where they are developmentally and the questions they’re really concerned about. And it changes.

How you talk to a five year old should be different than to a ten year old, a fifteen year old, or a twenty year old. Most likely you're not gonna talk to the five year old about ovulation or the stages of labor. Your answer will most likely be something like "When two people love each other very much, God gives them a special way to make a baby. And the baby grows from being very tiny to being very big in a mommy's body, and then when it's ready, the baby comes out of the mommy's body and is born. And then you have a family." And when you do that, you're speaking to what the child really needs to hear. That I came from somewhere. That my coming is connected to love. That my coming is a good thing. And now we have family. And that's enough for the five year old. It's what they need to know when they're five. **But if you take that same explanation and try to teach it in high school health class, it's woefully inadequate.** Because the goals of communication are totally different.

- D. This is the core of the problem we get into reading Genesis. In a post-enlightenment world, our questions about the universe tend to deal with it's material composition. How did the matter that we can observe in the universe come to be observable? What are the origins of this matter? What are the origins of the species? How did various species develop different genetic structures, etc. These are material questions. And when we read Genesis, we tend to read them through this framework. But what we're reading wasn't ever intended to be read that way. It's like we're the high school health students listening into a conversation between a parent and a five year old and then we're frustrated that their communication doesn't speak to our questions.
- E. So what do we do when that happens? Normally we react in one of two ways. **We try to force the story we hear to jive with the facts we know from other sources.** And often this kind of forcing requires us to ignore important pieces to make the two fit and they don't always fit together well. **Or we dismiss the story as irrelevant because it doesn't speak to our questions.** But either way, we're not really considering the text we're dealing with, because we're not entering into the actual communication that's happening. The only way to really hear the conversation between the parent and the five year old, is to leave the questions of health class where they are altogether. They're valid questions but **they're not a part of this communication.** If we want to know what this communication is and appreciate it, and possibly be impacted by it, we need to just listen like a five year old, and let our loving parent tell us what they have to say.
- F. **So imagine with me, that you live in the ancient world; specifically ancient Israel.** And for you, as you look to the universe around you and you wonder how all of this came to be, your questions aren't about matter, because matter isn't something concretely observable. **Your questions are more about meaning.** You can see there is stuff in the world. There are plants, there are animals, there is sky, there is sea. But why are there these things? You're not asking how...the things just are. But you're wondering "why"? And some of your friends, neighbors, tell stories of gods and goddesses who fought, who struggle and as they struggled with one another over petty things, the earth came into being. Others say the sun itself is a god. Or each part of the natural world is controlled by a god. But you are a part of a tribe that doesn't worship many gods. You're part of a tribe that has been handing down stories for centuries of one God, Yahweh. And there is a story that has been handed down, some say it started with Moses, but you don't know. You've been told this story since you were a child. And when your children ask you, you will tell it to them. And this is the story of how everything you observe came to exist.
- G. Now existence when you live in the ancient world is not about material composition. **Existence is about function.** Something begins to exist when it starts to have an observable function.

When it does something, when it *means* something. And so the story you hear is not a story about how the cosmos gained material form. It is a story about how the cosmos gained meaning and purpose; how the cosmos began to function. For that is what you're wondering when you look to the skies and consider how they came to be.

H. With all of that in mind, let's begin to read a fresh the story, as found in Genesis One and Two. (I'm gonna stop and make some comments along the way):

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 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.

(One way we know that this story was intended to be about bringing purpose and functionality was the word that here is translated "formless". Watkins talks about how this word *tohu* would be better translated "unproductive", because the word is not about space and material substance. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible it's used to describe a journey that get nowhere or a settlement that's unfruitful. The cosmos were nonexistent in the beginning of this story because they're non functional.)

3 Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light "day" and the darkness "night."

And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day.

(so when you hear this, as an ancient, you're not concerned about "from whence does the light come?" You know there is a pattern to life that separates sleep from wakefulness. And that basic pattern is the constant alteration between light and dark. This is the concept of time. The first thing that Yahweh does, you hear, to bring functionality to the universe is to speak into existence a rhythm called time.)

6 Then God said, "Let there be a space between the waters, to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth." 7 And that is what happened. God made this space to separate the waters of the earth from the waters of the heavens. 8 God called the space "sky."

And evening passed and morning came, marking the second day.

(As an ancient Israelite you have an understanding of the cosmos that your neighbors from other cultures also share, based on what you can observe. And the understanding is that there is something solid, perhaps a dome, that stretches above the earth. For how else could there be solid water that comes from the sky? You assume there must be a dome or a sheet or something up there that holds back the water, but at times the water drips through. And Yahweh doesn't seem to need to correct this assumption. Because God's not trying to teach you about the water cycle. The story being told is how the elemental forces of weather, which have such extreme power over an agrarian society, came to be. This system of weather was also ordered and given functionality by Creator God.)

9 Then God said, "Let the waters beneath the sky flow together into one place, so dry ground may appear." And that is what happened. 10 God called the dry ground "land" and the waters "seas." And God saw that it was good. 11 Then God said, "Let the land sprout with vegetation —every sort of seed-bearing plant, and trees that grow seed-bearing fruit. These seeds will then produce the kinds of plants and trees from which they came." And that is what happened.

12 The land produced vegetation—all sorts of seed-bearing plants, and trees with seed-bearing fruit. Their seeds produced plants and trees of the same kind. And God saw that it was good.

13 And evening passed and morning came, marking the third day.

(And so you have seen the Creator begin by ordering time, and then ordering weather and now he has ordered the natural world around you, orderly separating water from land, and filling the land with life. Bringing productivity to that which was formerly unproductive.)

14 Then God said, “Let lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. Let them be signs to mark the seasons, days, and years. 15 Let these lights in the sky shine down on the earth.” And that is what happened. 16 God made two great lights—the larger one to govern the day, and the smaller one to govern the night. He also made the stars. 17 God set these lights in the sky to light the earth, 18 to govern the day and night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.

19 And evening passed and morning came, marking the fourth day.

(Here you begin to notice a poetic structure that is meaningful in your culture. There is parallelism. Day four is parallel to day one. In day one God created time, shown through light and dark. In day four time is given items to function within it. It is given a calendar. This is what the sun and the moon and the stars do for you. They tell you the day, the week, the month, the season. And in this story you hear that is Yahweh who devised the calendar and gave it to you so that you can track your days.)

20 Then God said, “Let the waters swarm with fish and other life. Let the skies be filled with birds of every kind.” 21 So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that scurries and swarms in the water, and every sort of bird—each producing offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 Then God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply. Let the fish fill the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth.”

23 And evening passed and morning came, marking the fifth day.

(Again the parallels continue. In day 2, weather was created, with the imagery of separating the waters between the earth and the sky. Now God fills those spaces with functionaries. Birds in the sky. Fish in the sea. And God gives them a function - to be fruitful, to multiply. To thrive in their habitat.)

24 Then God said, “Let the earth produce every sort of animal, each producing offspring of the same kind—livestock, small animals that scurry along the ground, and wild animals.” And that is what happened. 25 God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to produce offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. 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.”

**27 So God created human beings in his own image.
In the image of God he created them;**

male and female he created them.

28 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.”

29 Then God said, “Look! I have given you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. 30 And I have given every green plant as food for all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the small animals that scurry along the ground—everything that has life.” And that is what happened.

And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day.

31 Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!

(And here we are getting to the point of it. On the sixth day, God brings functionality to the elements that will live within the land he created on day three. This is him saying “you, my children are the product of love.” Yahweh is showing humanity that all of this is for them to enjoy, and to inhabit, and to eat from, and to thrive in, and as God does, to reign over, to steward, to care for. But the story is not quite done.)

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

IV. Point 1: In Genesis, the story of God’s creation was about bringing functionality and purpose to the cosmos, not material form.

A. To be sure, the ancients assumed there is some sort of deity and this deity is ultimately the source of material form. So yes, they would have understood that God made all the stuff in the natural world. But Genesis one is NOT THAT STORY. How is that helpful for us?

B. God as creator is more than a maker of stuff. God is a maker of meaning.

1. John makes a similar point centuries later as he starts his gospel, in a clear reference to Genesis One.

In the beginning the Word already existed.

(The “Word” - logos, the Greek word for there personification of knowledge and wisdom and logic.)

***The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.***

2 He existed in the beginning with God.

***3 God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him.***

***4 The Word gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.***

***5 The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.***

(John is saying that through logic, through wisdom, through meaning making, that God brought the universe into existence, and then he goes on to tell the story of how this source of meaning becomes

flesh and dwells among us and is called Jesus.)

V. Point 2: Genesis 1 is the story of Temple Creation.

1. The end of the story is not day 6, it is day 7. And for Walton, this is the climax, the point of the whole first chapter of Genesis. God resting on the seventh day indicates the ultimate functionality of the cosmos in this story. It's not about initiating the first day off, although sure, that's cool too. But when Walton reads this verse about God resting in the seventh day, he sees more than a day off. He sees **God taking up residence, inhabiting a space, which in ancient terms, would mean moving into a temple. God "resting" means God taking up residence.**
2. **When the next president is elected** in November they become president elect, and they look toward the date in January when they are inaugurated and move into the White House. This is where they will dwell, where they reside, where they rest on their day off. It's also where they will go about their work of leading the country. And this is the story the creation account in Genesis one tells: **Creation is ultimately the building and inauguration of a Temple, a dwelling place of God.**
3. Total point of this story is this - **God is setting up the universe to function well for the humans' life - giving it order and structure and food, and ultimately, giving it Himself.** Not the narrative of God removed, living in some other dimension. THIS is God's home. God rests here, dwells here.
 - a. now the image will get frustrated; that's the fall story. Evil is in the world and functions to keep humans and God from having perfect communion in God's resting place of creation, but the whole story the Bible tells begins with this picture of God building a temple for himself and it is the cosmos.
4. Early on I mentioned that it's how we understand both the beginning and the end that matter, and this understanding of creation as a temple in the beginning informs, I believe, our understanding of how things end. In Revelation, John, the author, shares a picture of what he calls a new heaven and a new earth, a new city of God where peace and justice reign. And what is most to be celebrated about this picture is that the goal set forth in Genesis One is finally realized.

"3 I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

5 And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!"

This is a picture of new creation, of resurrection, of God once and for all silencing the voice of evil that has frustrated his temple, and in the same way he made Jesus new after the death Jesus suffered, giving him a life that is physical but safe from death and decay, he is doing the same thing with his creation. **He is bringing new life and renewal to all he has made.**

"Look, I am making everything new!" he says. Now mankind and God can dwell in unity, enjoying the thriving creation as they always were meant to do.

V. Point 3: Human beings are made in the image of God. A significant part of this has to be our capacity to create - not only stuff but meaning.

- A. Being made in the image of God (*imago dei*) is a big theological concept, but at a very simplistic level, **it must include creativity.** At this point in this story, that's all we know about this God is that this God is the creator, the bestower of meaning, the one who turns

that which is unproductive into something productive and purposeful, and then says, “I’m going to make something like myself”. At the very least, **that must mean that this thing he’s making also has this capacity to create.** And indeed we do.

- B. Further, later we see God helping people to reconnect with him after the fall, by building a concrete dwelling place of God, a tabernacle, which echoes the broader dwelling place that God has made. And when he does, he commissions artists to create this tabernacle. He empowers humans, made in his image, to use their own creative gifts to create this thing that is a microcosm of the bigger thing He’s done.

(Exodus 31:1-6) ***Then the Lord said to Moses, 2 “Look, I have specifically chosen Bezalel son of Uri, grandson of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. 3 I have filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him great wisdom, ability, and expertise in all kinds of crafts. 4 He is a master craftsman, expert in working with gold, silver, and bronze. 5 He is skilled in engraving and mounting gemstones and in carving wood. He is a master at every craft!***

6 “And I have personally appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to be his assistant. Moreover, I have given special skill to all the gifted craftsmen so they can make all the things I have commanded you to make...

- C. **This is a gift God has given humans: to create as God creates, to communicate as God communicates, to make stuff and meaning as God makes stuff and meaning.**
- D. **Science backs this up.** When you look at species, the **primary thing that sets the *homo sapien* apart is its capacity to think creatively. Further, homo sapiens alone have the capacity to team up with other *homo sapiens* to create collectively.** Humans have this capacity not only to create on their own, but to combine forces and to work together to create even more, to build on one another’s creations through collaboration.
1. for me, this too points to this idea that **we are made in the image of God.** If God really is **one God in three persons** - Father, Son, and Spirit somehow ever relating with love and cooperation - and this God creates not just out of solitary God-ness, but out of relational God-ness, wouldn’t it make sense that for this God’s image to be reflected **you would need multiple people relating and co-creating as well?** That it’s meant to be a cooperative effort, just as it is for the God who says “Let us make mankind in our image”.
 5. Further, **our understanding of God’s blessing on our own human creativity even impacts how we understand the Bible itself.** We do not have a Bible because God dropped a book out of the sky, or because he possessed human beings in some way and dictated to them something to write down. (Our story is that God walked on this earth. If he wanted us to read a book written in his words, why didn’t Jesus write one?) No: we believe that God’s spirit works in concert with real human creativity, inspiring, in a real sense, their storytelling, their history writing, their poetry, but through the empowerment and in the voice of human creativity. **God does not need to possess human beings to speak through them; to do so would diminish the capacity he gave them to freely create. Rather God seems pleased to allow humans to express their connection to God through their own creative mediums, and we call that inspired but very human expression the revelation of God.**

VI. So what? What’s our response? Three invitations.

- A. **Invitation One: Find God in His Creation.** - God inhabits His creation and we experience him through his creation.

1. **Story:** Weekend before our first house church gathering in my home of the group that would eventually become Haven, I wanted to go on a **personal retreat**. My goal was connect with God, be receptive to anything he might say to me. I was nervous; I didn't know if I was gonna blow my shot at this thing I'd been training for and dreaming of for so long - something like 13 years at that point. So I gotta an Air B n B n Santa Rosa, and I asked my hosts where a good place to go and be in nature would be. And they gave me directions to drive to Bodega Bay. I wasn't prepared for what I'd see there. (pictures)

The moment I got out of my car, I was stunned. It was too beautiful for words. These pictures don't really do it justice. All I could feel was awe and wonder, and an overwhelming sense of God's presence. And though I'm sure many of the people who walked along the cliffs with me weren't church goers, there was a communal sense of awe and wonder in the air. People spoke with hushed voices. You recognized to be there, you were in the presence of majesty. And in the face of this majesty, I felt God speak confidence and peace to my spirit. That he was so much bigger than my little insecurities or anxieties, and his purposes were so much grander, as well. I could stand in hope that this was the God I was partnering with and I could trust that whatever came about would be good because whoever made this sight was so unmistakably good.

2. **You can do this too. Put yourself in places to appreciate nature.** Lots of opportunities living where we live. In August, we'll do this together. Take time to be in nature with Jesus, the *logos* through whom all was made. Ask creator God to walk in the garden of his creation with you and to reveal his character and his purposes for you; to show you how he dwells here. Meet with God in the temple of his created world. **Let it inspire your worship, your awe, your wonder with God.**

B. **Invitation two: Worship God through caring for His creation.**

1. In Ancient Israel, when God had his people develop a system of worship that revolved around the tabernacle and later the actual temple, he appointed a group of people whose job it was to attend to the worship space. **The Levites worshipped God through taking extreme care dealing with the items that were part of the temple,** maintaining them, keep everything pure. If the earthly temple is a microcosm of the greater temple Yahweh inhabits, then **I believe that humanity, those made in his image, are intended to steward this temple like Levites.** So recycling - it's not just a good thing to do because you're in the Bay Area. **Recycling is an act of worship.** Composting is an act of worship. Reducing our carbon footprint, bicycling instead of driving, planting trees and gardens and nurturing the created world around us. these are acts of worship. These are ways we honor the creation and care for god's temple.

C. **Invitation three: Worship Creator God by creating.**

1. **J.R.R. Tolkien** was a firm believer in the concept that employing our capacity to create was a form of worship. He called this use of creativity "**sub-creation**", and it informed his own artistry. **"We have come from God, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. Indeed only by myth-making, only by becoming 'sub-creator' and inventing stories, can Man aspire to the state of perfection that he knew before the Fall."**— J.R.R. Tolkien. He took this seriously as anyone who's actually read Lord of the Rings and waded through the discussions of elvish or the history of some minute character has to note. Tolkien was more than a fantasy writer. He was a worshipper and his form of worship was the chronicling of Middle Earth.
2. This has all kinds of applications. For Myself - songwriting has been an area in which I have felt God's pleasure and at times the mix of creativity and inspiration. Now: sermon writing. **It**

doesn't have to have content that's explicitly about Jesus to be worshipful. When I was songwriting music to perform in clubs people used to ask me if I was a Christian musician. And I said no - I'm a musician who happens to be a Christian. Jason - writing software code. Celia- composing a research project. Don - photography and design work. Jason and others - cooking

3. **Where is your area of "sub-creation"?** Engage in it fully, recognizing that this too is an act of worship, and ask God to meet you in your creative efforts.