

Genesis 1:1–5 (NIV)

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

³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

Genesis 1:26–28 (NIV)

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,

in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Genesis 2:7–9 (NIV)

⁷ Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

⁸ Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2:15–18 (NIV)

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

¹⁸ The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Genesis 2:21–25 (NIV)

²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³ The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;

she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.”

²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

The true story

God creates everything there is and pronounces it good. He creates humans in his image and gives them responsibility over the earth and all its creatures. Indeed, God forms a man from the dust of the earth and breathes life into the man. Then because the man needs a companion, a helper, God fashions a woman from the man and gives them both a beautiful garden in which to live, to work, to raise a family, and to love.

All is good, good, and good.

This week, St. Andrew begins a nine-month journey through the Bible titled, *God-Is*. Sermons, many of the adult classes, these weekly studies and more will all be focused on this journey. The journey is going to be divided into shorter series, such as the first one, *God in Motion*, that will take us from the story of the creation through the story of Moses.

I've taught a lot of adults over the years and I've learned that most have little idea how the larger biblical story works, even those who have spent time in Bible studies of one sort or another. Consequently, too many of us are reduced to making sense of isolated stories that we hear in church or read about in a daily devotional. We have no way to connect together any of them, to see how God has worked and is working in our lives and world. Too often, everything gets reduced to finding a moral in a story or a moment of inspiration. Here's an example. If someone asked you whether Jesus needed to be Jewish, how would you answer? Where would you put Jesus on the map of the Bible's story? Without answers to those questions and others, there is just no way to grasp the story of Scripture.

So, we are going to try to connect some dots in this nine-month journey and open up the pages for all of us in new and exciting ways. The larger biblical narrative can be thought of as a six act play¹:

Act 1 – God **creates** everything, including humans in God's image

Act 2 – The humans **rebel** against God, separating themselves from God and one another.

Act 3 – God chooses and saves a people, **Israel**, through whom God will restore all humanity, indeed, all of creation.

Act 4 – When Israel, God's people, proves unable to be faithful, God provides one faithful Israelite, **Jesus**, through whom God's restoration is achieved.

Act 5 – God's renewal project continues as the Spirit of God empowers **the church** to build for the kingdom of God.

Act 6 – Jesus returns and God's **restoration and renewal** is fully consummated in the arrival of the new heavens and earth.

Act 1 -- Creation -- the basics

We begin here, Act 1 in one week. Genesis 1 and 2. Foundational to all that follows. Here are the absolute basics.

Act 1, the beginning of it all, begins simply enough. God creates everything there is – yes, everything. If it exists, God created it. And God pronounces it all *good*. All of it. Every corner, every last bit and particle – good.

And of all the creatures that God creates, one creature is made in God's image – the humans. And God gives the humans the responsibility (that's what we mean by "stewardship" or "dominion") for God's good creation (Gen 1:26). They are to be "fruitful and multiply," participating in God's work of creation.

We learn further that this good God creates a beautiful place for the humans, where they can live and work and love. Later in the story, we're told, in beautifully evocative imagery, that God comes to walk with them in the evenings. There is even a tree in the garden from which the humans will eat so they will live in eternity with God. The humans are free to enjoy God, one another, and this garden -- with one exception. There is one tree from which they are not to eat. If they do, God tells them, they will die, not live.

¹ I first encountered this way of teaching the story in the work of N. T. Wright, who used the metaphor of a five act play with an epilogue. Later, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen wrote a book, *The Drama of Scripture*, built on Wright's structure, though they changed it to a six act play.

That's the big picture. God creates the cosmos and everything in it, and it is all good. When the curtain closes on the first act, there is nothing but hope and anticipation of the glories to come.

The Image of God -- the Imago Dei

One of the most remarkable claims that the Bible makes is that we and all humans are made in the image or likeness of God. To use the old Latin phrase, we are the *imago dei*.

But what does this really mean? Certainly, it doesn't mean that we look like God, for God has no physical body. Rather, there are a couple of truths that are proclaimed here.

First, God is sovereign over his creation and as the sovereign, God has appointed humanity to exercise wise and caring dominion over what God has created. It is a bit like seeing each of us an outpost of God, charged with responsibilities over all that God has entrusted to us.

Second, to proclaim that humans are the *imago dei* is to proclaim that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. God is unity in three persons; we are created in the plural, male and female (v. 27). Humans are marked out from the rest of creation. Every single human life is to be cherished and protected, accorded dignity and respect. Every person on the planet is made in God's image -- the people we love and the people we hate, those we admire and those we despise.

Genesis -- a book of beginnings

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the book of Genesis to the rest of the Bible. It opens with two creation stories, the first written from God's perspective and the second from the humans' perspective. What quickly follows is the story of the humans' tragic decision to turn away from God seeking to be like gods themselves. We then get the story of Noah, a story of "uncreation" and a fresh start that proves little better than the first. Then, in Genesis 12, we are told how God chose a lone husband and wife, Abraham and Sarah, with whom God made a covenant that all the families of the earth would be blessed through them. As the rest of the 50-chapter book unfolds, we see God's redemptive work moving forward through Abraham and Sarah's descendants.

Work in the Garden of Eden?

Look at Genesis 2:15 above. Yep . . . right there. The humans are to work the garden and take care of it -- before things go so terribly wrong. So work is part of God's good creation.

It always surprises people that work, much less working a garden, was part of the creation *before* Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Work can be so difficult and crushing for people that it seems as if that is all work was ever meant to be. But in the story of the Garden of Eden, the work becomes difficult only after the humans wreck things by doing the one thing God asked them not to do. Only then does the soil in the garden become hard to break and till. Only then do weeds grow. Only then do Adam and Eve find out what it is like to be a Texas gardener.

But before their rebellion, the garden's soil is soft and fertile. I imagine it to be like one big bug-free, disease-free Miracle-Gro commercial. Even I might have a green thumb there! My own concrete-like weed-laden soil is a distortion of God's creation, a distortion intertwined with the distortion of my own relationship with God.

It is the same with the work lives of far too many people. Their work lives are a distortion of

God's intent. They are burdened by a life filled with work that is frustrating, mundane, even dehumanizing. Too often, this is made worse, not better, by our co-workers.

Yet, some people are confident that they are doing the work that God wants them to do. Count me among them. I've had great jobs in the past and some that were soul-crushing. I've been very privileged and blessed in some of the places and people to

which my work life has taken me. But now, at St. Andrew, I find myself doing important work that I enjoy with people who are encouraging in all things.

Fruitful and multiply

Sure, almost everyone knows that God tells the humans to be fruitful and multiply. But consider what that really means. God has made us co-creators in this world. Further, neither men nor women can be fruitful and multiply on their own. Rather, a man and a woman must become “one flesh” in sexual union to carry out God’s command. Marriage is the institution that carries this sacred task. Take a moment and spin this out in your thoughts for a bit. This is the sort of thing that makes Genesis the underpinning of so much of the Judeo-Christian worldview. Both Jesus and Paul refer back to 2:24 when they are asked about marriage. Remarkable.

Subdue God’s creation??

So God creates all that is and then God tells the humans they must subdue it (1:28). If God’s creation is good wasn’t it then “perfect” before things went off the rails and the humans rebelled?

Hurricanes pound south Louisiana. Another earthquake devastates Haiti. Hundred-year floods wash through central Europe. No one did anything to bring these on. They just happened. The suffering and misery beyond measure.

The simple question is “Why?” How could this be? Where is God in all this? Why would a good and loving God create a world that can wreak such havoc on its inhabitants? Could it be that God isn’t really as good and loving as we think? Or perhaps God would like to do something about it, but can’t. Perhaps God isn’t really as powerful as we think. How are we supposed to believe that a loving, good, and all-powerful God created this world, pronounced it “good” and then simply watches as natural disasters of one sort or another inflict misery on those made in God’s image?

Over the years, such questions have come to my mind many times and I’m sure the same is true for you.

The truth is that I have a much easier time reconciling my belief in a loving and good God with the misery that we humans inflict on one another. Whether it is war or murder or theft or abuse, I understand what we sinful humans inflict on one another. We abuse the free will that God has given us. Even starvation is a human created problem, at least in our day. There is plenty of food capacity on the planet to feed everyone and we have the means to get it to them, but it is our collective sinfulness that stands in the way of filling the empty bellies.

I even understand (at least I think I do!) why God gave us this free will that we so horribly abuse. He wants us to love . . . and for love to be love, it *must* be freely given or it isn’t really love.

However, free will and its exercise have nothing to do with these disasters. Sure, I know we build in some places we shouldn’t, but earthquakes and tornados devastate vast regions. Diseases strike down millions. We have the means to lessen the suffering, but we could never eliminate it.

Terence Fretheim, a professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, published a book entitled, *Creation Untamed*. I’ve always found Fretheim to be worthwhile reading and I had the pleasure of hearing him speak several years ago. This book didn’t disappoint. He takes a hard-nosed, Scripture-based look at the theological questions swirling around natural disasters. If you feel spurred on to read the book for yourself, I hope you will do so.

A careful look at the creation story

Fretheim begins by asking us to take a closer look at the creation story. He contends that the world was created good, but not perfect; that the world was created with the

expectation of change and growth. In other words, the cosmos created by God was built to be dynamic not static, from the beginning. The dynamism has nothing to do with sin and rebellion; it is just the nature of the fabric from which our world was made.

Here's some of the evidence from the creation accounts.²

- God pronounces creation “good” and “very good” at the end of each creating day. But what does it mean? It can't really mean perfection or finality, for after God creates the man, we learn that God recognizes that “it is not good that the man should be alone” and God resolves to make the man a helper (2:18). When the animals prove unsatisfactory helpers, God fashions a woman, using the man as raw materials. All this speaks to growth and change, even to elements of the “not good” being present in the “good” creation.
- When God gives the humans a beautiful garden in which to live, they are also told it is theirs “to till and keep” (2:15). Thus, the garden itself is a place of growth and change that must be tended and worked. It is good but it is not “perfect” or even “complete.” In the context of a garden that must be worked, I'm not even sure what “perfect” means, but it can't mean static or unchanging.
- The most direct evidence of a “good not perfect” creation is from 1:28. God gives the humans this charge: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.” Subdue it? A creation which still must be subdued is far from perfect or complete. Fretheim suggests that the best sense of the Hebrew here is “to bring order out of continuing disorder.” There is more on this word in the text box below. The result of this “subduing” must be that the creation came to look far different than it did on the seventh day, just as it continues to look different each day from the day before.

What is the result of all this? A remarkable statement of God's choosing to make humanity partners in the on-going processes of creation. From the beginnings of creation the humans are given responsibility for God's creation and participate in its

Subdue

Here is some basic info on the Hebrew word that is translated “subdue” in 1:28:

This verb and its derivative occur fifteen times in the Old Testament. It is evidently related to Akkadian *kabāsu* “to tread down,” and Arabic *kabasa* “to knead, stamp, press” (cf. also Arabic *kabasa* “to seize with the hand”). In the Old Testament it means “to make to serve, by force if necessary.”

Despite recent interpretations of Genesis 1:28 which have tried to make “subdue” mean a responsibility for building up, it is obvious from an overall study of the word's usage that this is not so.

kābaš assumes that the party being subdued is hostile to the subduer, necessitating some sort of coercion if the subduing is to take place. Thus the word connotes “rape” in Esther 7:8, or the conquest of the Canaanites in Numbers 32:22, 29; Joshua 18:1; I Chronicles 22:18. In 2 Chronicles 28:10; Nehemiah 5:5; Jeremiah 34:11, 16 it refers to forced servitude.

Therefore “subdue” in Gen 1:28 implies that creation will not do man's bidding gladly or easily and that man must now bring creation into submission by main strength. It [creation] is not to rule man. However, there is a twistedness in humanity which causes us to perform such a task with fierce and destructive delight. Try as we might, we cannot subdue this. But it can be subdued and this is the promise of Micah 7:10, “He will subdue our iniquities.”¹

¹Harris, R. L., Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., & Waltke, B. K. (1999). *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (430). Chicago: Moody Press.

² My view of the two creation stories (1:1-2:4a & 2:4b-25) is that they are two perspectives of a single account. The first story is written from the perspective of God. The second story is written from the perspective of the humans. Thus, they are complementary, not contradictory, as some suggest.

on-going dynamism and growth. Fretheim puts it this way: “From the beginning, God chooses not to be the only one who has creative power and the capacity, indeed the obligation, to exercise it. . . . God is a power-sharing God, indeed a creation-sharing God, and God will be faithful to that way of relating to those created in the divine image.”³

In grappling with the difficult theological issues created by natural disasters, we have to begin by recognizing that the cosmos was created as changing and dynamic, even wild and hostile, needing to be subdued. This is a far cry from the placid and idyllic Garden of Eden that is portrayed by most artists. Further this dynamism and wildness is pronounced “good” and “very good” by God. This is how God designed the cosmos and, thus, God is pleased with his creation. How could it be otherwise? Nonetheless, this challenges some of our long-held notions of God’s creative activity as well as our own participation in it. In the coming weeks, we’ll work our way to a more clear-eyed understanding of just what the Bible tells us about God and his untamed creation.

In closing

So there we have it. Just a bit of what we find in the first two chapters of Genesis -- Act 1 of the larger biblical story. When the curtain falls, all is bright and hopeful. But a terrible darkness will soon fall across the land.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

We’ve just begun a study: *Paul’s Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus*.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We’ve just begun a study of John’s Gospel

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” **Both classes are recorded and are available each week as a podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.**

Scott’s Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

This week: We begin a nine-month journey through the Bible, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for each week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.

³from p. 31-32 of *Creation Untamed*.