



Sermon Transcript January 12, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption What is Man? Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 12, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Genesis 1:26-28

²⁶Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Psalm 8

¹ O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

²Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength
because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.

⁶ You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,

⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹ O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Introduction

In Psalm 8, David asks the question, “*What is man?*” He asks this question as he stares up into the heavens and takes in the vastness of the night sky: the moon and the stars. In comparison to the heavens, he feels rather small and he asks, “*What is man?*”

Randy Frazee helps us capture what David is feeling by scaling down our solar system by a factor of a billion. He says in this vastly scaled down solar system, the earth would be the size of a grape. The sun would be the height of a man. Jupiter would be the size of a grapefruit; Saturn an orange. Uranus and Neptune would be size of a lemon. Can you guess how big humans would be in this scaled down solar system? We would be the size of a single atom, completely invisible to the human eye.¹ Do you feel rather small?

How much more does the knowledge gained by modern science cause us to cry out “*What is man?*” Through staring into the telescope we have now discovered that there are over one hundred billion galaxies in the universe. This adds color to David’s words in Psalm 8:3-4, “*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars [the one hundred billion galaxies], which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?*”

“*What is man?*” This is a question of identity. Who am I? What is my purpose? It is a critical question to ask and answer. Where do you get your sense of self and your sense of worth? In his book *Habits of the Heart* Robert Bellah suggests modern secularism teaches us that we develop ourselves only by looking inward, by detaching and leaving home, religious communities, and all other requirements so that we can make our own choices and determine who we are for ourselves.² But David responds to this kind of thinking by saying, “No!” I come to understand who I am by looking outside of me, by looking up at all that is made. It is here that I am confronted with the glory of God. “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.” I can’t even begin to know who I am apart from looking outside of myself and looking to the One who created all things, the One who made me—to God.

And so, this is how the story of the Bible begins. It begins with God. The very opening words of the Bible go like this, “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” If you want to know who you are and what your purpose in life is, then this is where you need to start. You don’t start by looking deep within yourself to know who you are and what is your purpose in life. Rather, you need to start with God.

That is exactly where we are going to start this morning as we begin our six-month journey through the story-line of the Bible. We are starting at the very beginning with the story of Creation. Over the next six-months we will be following the acronym CASKET EMPTY to put together the story of the Bible. CASKET stands for the Old Testament (Creation—Abraham—Sinai—Kings—Exile—Temple) and EMPTY stands for the New Testament (Expectation—Messiah—Pentecost—Teachings—Yet to Come). This is the story of God’s unfolding plan of redemption. And so today, we begin with the letter “C” - the story of Creation.

You can’t answer the question “*What is man?*” apart from the story of Creation. You can’t understand who you are if you don’t know God, the Creator. So as we begin this journey through the story of the Bible, I want to answer David’s question: “*What is man?*” And I want to answer that question by looking at the Creator and all that he has made. In doing so we first discover who we are not. And then we discover who we are.

Before we answer the question “*What is man?*” I want to consider two extremes we tend to wrestle with when we try to understand who we are. First of all, in our pride and at our worst, we tend to think too highly of ourselves and when we do this we take advantage of others or look at others as a means to serve our end or our purpose. So that is one extreme in how we view ourselves. And yet, at the same time, we can be guilty of thinking too little of who we are and what God has intended for man. After David considers the smallness of man in asking “*What is man?*” he then says something pretty amazing about the exalted role of humanity, “*Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands.*” This brings dignity to every human being we encounter and fills us with a sense of purpose. And often we lose sight of the dignity that God has bestowed upon every human being. So “*What is man?*”

What is Man? Who We Are Not

Here is what keeps the extreme of our pride in check. It is remembering that God is God and we are not. I can remember having a conversation with a colleague of mine early in my ministry career and he said to me that one of the key principles in life is maintaining the distinction between the Creator and the creature. In fact, Paul says this is the fundamental problem of man. We forget to maintain the distinction between the Creator and the creature. He says in Romans 1:25 that “*we exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.*” And so at the beginning of the story of the Bible we see that God alone is the Creator of all things.

This distinction between the Creator and the creature is clearly seen in the opening statement of the Bible. *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”* The Bible simply begins with God. He has no beginning. He has no rivals. He is distinct from all that he has made. He is sovereign and God alone has absolute freedom. Our culture values freedom, but none of us have absolute freedom. We are dependent. We are interdependent. But God in his absolute freedom chooses to create *the heavens and the earth*—which is a way of saying “all that there is.” It all finds its source in God.

And his sovereign power is on display in that he speaks this world into existence. Through the power of his word he created all that there is. All throughout the first chapter of Genesis we hear this refrain repeated, *“And God said . . . and so it was.”* Psalm 33:6-9 rehearses this truth and the implications that come with it. It says in verse 6, *“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.”* Graeme Goldsworthy says “the greatness of God is shown by his needing only to say *“Let there be . . .”* for things to be brought into existence.”³ Who can even fathom such greatness? Science gets pretty excited when they can take all of their resources and laboratory apparatus and bring about matter or destroy matter. I don’t mean to downplay that and the power of it. But think of the unfathomable power to speak into existence the heavens and the earth—all that there is. And so the Psalm goes onto say that the implication for all of this is that we are to worship God. *“Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!”* Why? *“For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”*

The reason this is so important is because it establishes that there is only one God. By virtue of being the Creator, God has no rivals. He alone is God. This refrain is repeated throughout the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, Isaiah 45:18 says, *“For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens, who formed the earth and made it, ‘I am the LORD and there is no other.’”* In the New Testament, Revelation 4:11 we hear this song of worship come from the throne room of heaven and it goes like this: *“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.”* Why? *“For you created all things and by your will they existed and were created.”* And so with David, when we look to the heavens and consider all that God has made through the power of his word we can’t help but worship God and declare, *“O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.”* Someone might ask, “How do you know there is a God?” It is sufficient to say that his creation proves it. That is why the Bible doesn’t begin with some philosophical argument about the existence of God. It assumes the existence of God through what has been made. The power of God and his divine nature is clearly seen in the things that are made and it leads us to worship God.

But it is not just God's power that is on display through what he has created. Creation also reveals the incredible goodness of God. This too is a refrain that is repeated after each day of creation, "*and it was good.*" The goodness of God is seen in the way God brings order to his creation and the way God governs all that he has made. You can even see the order to God's creation in how the first three days of creation correspond to the second three days of creation.

On the first day God creates light and on the fourth day, God creates the sun and the moon. Genesis 1:16 says: "*God made two great lights—the greater light to govern [or rule] the day and the lesser light to govern the night.*" Why are they there? The sun rules the day and the moon rules the night. In fact, science tells us that everything is "just right" to sustain life on this little dot we call earth—that as far as we can tell—is unique among the one hundred billion galaxies. Earth orbits the sun at just the right distance and so it is not too hot and not too cold. The moon governs the tides of the oceans and the rotation of the earth brings the sun up each morning and down each evening. All of this is essential to maintaining life. I was struck by one headline that rehearsed these and more scientific observations about the unique planet we live on. The headline read, "13 Incredible Lucky Earth Facts." No luck is involved in all of this. This is evidence of the design of a good God who provides for life and for what he has made.

On the second day God separates the sky and the sea and on day five he fills the sea with fish and the sky with birds. On the third day, God separates the land from the sea and on the sixth day God creates living creatures and humans. The goodness of God is seen in what God has given for life to be productive and this world to be habitable. There is an order to all that God has made and there is a proper function for everything and a proper relationship that it bears to everything else. It all fits together. And so at the end of the sixth day of creation, we hear this final summary, "*it was very good.*"

This brings us to day seven—the Sabbath—a day of rest. It is a day that reveals the love of God for us. Once God made all that he has made, he ceased from creating. In a sense, God has rested from creating ever since. In Genesis 2:2 it says that on the seventh day "*God rested from all his work that he had done.*" The implication is that we are invited to enter that "rest" and enjoy what God has made. God shares himself with us through what he has made. It is an invitation for relationship. God did not create out of need. He was not compelled out of something lacking in himself, nor was he forced or compelled from something outside of himself. Rather, as we already noted, God freely created all that he made and he did so to share himself—it was out of self-giving love of God that he created.

So what does the creation of *the heavens and the earth* tell us about the distinction between the Creator and the creature? What do we learn about God and about us? We learn through what God has made that God is powerful and therefore it is natural for us to worship God. There is no other God and we are captivated with his majesty. We learn that God is good and so we respond with trust. We learn that God loves us and invites us to relationship and so we marvel at the fact that the Creator God can be known. In fact, that is how Jesus defines eternal life in John 17:3. *“And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”* If you want to answer the question, “Who am I?” or *“What is man?”* you need to start with God. Jeff Robson says it this way, “To function properly everything and everyone needs to be understood in relation to God.”⁴

What is Man? Who We Are

While it is true that we are not God, it is also true that the vision the Bible has for man is rather stunning. I think we often fail to see the dignity and the value the Bible gives to humanity. As we close in on Genesis 1:26-28 we come to the climax of God’s act of creation. On the sixth day of creation, God created man. When it came time for God to create man, we hear these amazing words: *“Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness.”* We were made in the image of God.

Well what does that mean? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? The answer to that question can be found in the rest of verse 26. Here God gives explanation to what it means to be created in the image of God. *“And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”* To be made in the image of God means that God gives man the sacred responsibility to be in charge over what God has made. It is a high calling. What it suggests is that we are to reflect God’s righteous rule, to be his image and likeness, to exercise dominion in a wise stewardship over all creation.

We go on to read in verse 27 that God indeed did it. *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”* Both men and women reflect God’s divine image. Then he tells us why we are here. He gives us our purpose. In verse 28 he says, *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.”* We are to multiply and fill the earth with image bearers of God and in doing so we are to bring everything under God’s good and wise rule.

I like the way David Palmer expands our understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God and how we take the gifts God has given us to reflect our role in the world that God has made. He writes, “Our rational abilities, our power to think means that humanity is reflecting God in this way, that we can think God's thoughts after Him. We are given a moral capacity to recognize the difference between right and wrong, and this reflects the moral nature of God . . . We have been given capacity for fellowship with God in worship, and this reflects the fellowship that God Himself enjoys, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with each other . . . We have been given the ability to make meaningful decisions, and this reflects in a very small way the supreme directing power of God who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will. We have been given a sense of beauty that reflects the God who scatters beauty profusely over snow-crowned mountains, lake-jeweled valleys, and awe-inspiring sunsets. We have been given a gift of speech, which is an imitation of God who speaks to us and makes the world that reveals His will to us through His spoken Word. We have been given a gift of song that echoes God who rejoices over us with singing.”⁵ All these gifts reflect God’s image in us.

Genesis 1 gives us an overview of the story of creation. Genesis 2 take the lens the camera and puts it’s focus on the story of the creation of man. From the dust of the ground, God forms man and breathes life into him. We are both body and soul. We are unique to all that God has made. The anthropologist Desmond Morris has written: “Human beings are animals. They are sometimes monsters, sometimes magnificent, but always animals.”⁶ But we are not just animals. We alone, of all of God’s creation, have been made in his image. And so when God places man in the Garden of Eden—a place of abundance and pleasure, literally *paradise*—he gives the command as his image bearers in Genesis 2:15, “*to work it and keep it.*” We are to take care of the world that God has made. There are three implications to this that help us answer the question “*What is man?*”

Your Work is Sacred: This has tremendous implications for your work—your job. It is sacred work. It is not like what you do for your job is “secular” work and what you do at the church is “sacred” work. Your job is a way in which you fulfill the original purpose for which we were created. It is helpful to see that work is not the result of the Fall. Work is part of the order of creation. The Fall brought toil and pain to our work. But our work itself is part of our original purpose. Our original job description was to “*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.*” It is called *The Cultural Mandate* and that has not changed.

Nancy Pearcy puts it this way: “The first phrase “*be fruitful and multiply*” means to

develop the *social* world; build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws. The second phrase “*subdue the earth*” means to harness the *natural* world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, compose music. We are to create culture and build civilization—nothing less.”⁶ The implication is that your job is not a second-class activity, something you do just to put food on the table. It is the high calling for which you were created. So whether through your job you create things, provide things or renew things, you are reflecting the image of God and fulfilling your calling for which you were made. I wonder, how might that change the way you go to work tomorrow? How might that bring value to what you do? I understand that “Part 2 of the letter “C” next week tells us why our toil is toilsome and often painful and hard. But don’t lose sight that tomorrow through your work you reflect the image of God and fulfill the purpose for which he has made us.

The Environment Matters: Secondly, if God has placed us here as image bearers to take care of the world that he has created, we ought to be people who are concerned for the environment. We actually have a theological foundation for caring about the environment. “This is our Father’s world!” In our corner of the evangelical world we can often be heard singing, “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through.” Sometimes that can cause us to be somewhat cavalier about the conservation of what God has made. And yet, as we progress through this story and make our way through the New Testament, we discover that “God’s unfolding plan of redemption” includes the restoration of this world that he has created. Romans 8 tells us that all of creation is longing for that day of redemption. It says in Romans 8:21 “*that creation itself will be set free from its bondage and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*” Remember, when he finished creating all that he made, God took delight in it and said, “*it is very good.*” God loves all that he has made.

This means that we are to conserve natural resources, to make the best possible use of them. It means that we have to be concerned to prevent the erosion of the soil, the destruction of forests, the irresponsible use of energy, pollution of rivers and lakes, pollution of the air we breathe. It means that we must be wise stewards of the earth and of all that is in it. It means that humanity promotes and preserves what's useful and beautiful to the glory of God.

Not Meant to Be Alone: And finally, in the Garden of Eden, God gives us even more detail about who we are and why we are here. The Lord says in Genesis 2:18: “*It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.*” We were not created as individuals to be individuals. That goes against some of the flow of our current culture

in our quest for individual freedom.

The biblical vision of humanity is a corporate image. It is actually not good to be alone. Some have a call to singleness, but even those with a call to singleness still are married in the bride of Christ. We are not created to be alone. God says, "It is not good. I'll make a helper suitable for him." The Lord makes a companion for Adam, taking a rib from his side. Note the complementary picture of standing side-by-side, male and female, one not standing above the other or in front, but side-by-side. It is a very beautiful picture. Husbands and wives next to each other will know uniquely the vulnerability and weakness of the other, and that vulnerability and weakness will be exposed unless you're standing side-by-side. Adam bursts into poetry when he sees Eve, and the opening chapters of the Bible end with the man and his wife naked and unashamed.

All of this is a very humbling picture of fellowship with God, a sacred responsibility for worship, to reflect God's righteousness in our relationships, and to cultivate the earth, to engage in meaningful and rewarding labor. It's a picture of companionship and intimacy. It's a picture where there is no shame, no guilt, no fear. It's a world that we can almost not even imagine, and yet deep within, etched into the deep memory of every human being, is this echo of Eden.

Conclusion

So "*What is man?*" Well for starters, we know that we are not God. God alone is God by virtue of being the Creator. All that God has made has been declared good and that God's act of creation is an expression of his freedom to create and thus it is an expression of his love. God love us. Just look at all that God has made and all the delights that are found this world that he has made.

So "*What is man?*" We need to know that we are made body and soul in His image. Who am I? We need to hear God's Word teach us that we are uniquely made in the image and likeness of God. Nothing else in all creation is described in this way. It means that we have a very real responsibility to the life all around us.

Why am I here? What is my purpose? We are to reveal God in our actions. We are like mirrors to reflect God's character in the lives around us. We are mirrors of God's creative power to cultivate and steward over the earth. We have a real responsibility and this responsibility is both to the earth and all that is in it in general, but it also has this specificity. We are responsible for the place where God puts us. We are responsible for

the people that God puts around us. We are responsible to do the work that He gives to us, meaningful work that will contribute in the end to the earth's being filled with image bearers to praise Him.

This is a critical question to ask, "*What is man?*" If you define who you are by looking inside of you, then the primary motivation of your life will be *self-assertion*. In other words, meaning in life will be found in asserting yourself. That almost always involves a self-centered view of life. On the other hand, if you understand who you are in relation to God and to others, then your basic motivation in life is one of *self-sacrifice* and it is defined and celebrated by the duties you maintain to those around you.

This is where the story begins. "C" stands for Creation and it is the foundation to understanding who we are and what our purpose in life is. You can't know who you are until you know God the Creator and know the purpose for which you were made. "*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*"

Scripture Reading

This coming week, read again Genesis 1-11, Psalm 8, 29, 93, 96-98, 104,148. Begin to reflect on what went wrong with the world God has made. That is what we will talk about next Sunday.

¹Randy Frazee *The Heart of the Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) 26

²Robert Bellah *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) chapter 3, "Finding Oneself" pp. 55-84

³Graeme Goldsworthy *According To Plan* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991) 91

⁴Jeff Robson *The Book of Books* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2015) 19

⁵David Palmer Sermon "C is for Creation" <https://www.kenwoodbaptist.org>, September 10, 2017

⁶Nancy Pearcey *Total Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) 47

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

1. Spend some time considering the various things that God has made. What in God's creation causes you to say "*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*"
2. How do the things you just rehearsed about God's creation increase your faith in God? What is something right now in your life that you are having to trust God for? Pray about these things for one another.
3. Read together Genesis 1-2 and Psalm 8. What do you learn about God from these passages? Who is He? What is God like?
4. What do these passages teach us about the people of God?
5. Read Genesis 1:26-28. Make five observations about God's creation of human beings. What are the tasks that are given to them.
6. How do these things impact your view of work?
How do these things impact your view of the environment?
How important are relationships (see Genesis 2:18-25)
7. Read Hebrews 2:5-9. How does what you read in Psalm 8 connect to Jesus?
8. What is one thing for you "to do" in light of your discussion?
9. Who can you tell about what you learned this week?