

## ***Tell Me The Story: The Relationality of God - wk 3***

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Sept. 12, 2021

I think it's fair to say that the struggles our cultures are presently facing are the result of having no compelling narrative for our world. There are many stories being offered, but there's no single larger story to make sense of all the smaller stories. This is what makes Genesis 1-11 such a great gift. Here is a story that, when given a chance, begins to put things into perspective.

This story in Genesis spoke a rescuing word to those who first heard it centuries ago, and it speaks a life-giving, freeing word to us who hear it today. In this story, Genesis 1-11, we finally begin to understand the glory of being human. We begin to understand why our world needs Jesus, why He needed to come, and what He came to do. And in fact, as we work through the story, we are led to Jesus, the One who turns out to be what humanity was originally made to be.

Let me begin with a very quick review. In my first sermon, I suggested the first three notes of the creation story are "Creator creates creation." In my last sermon I offered seven observations on what the Creation song is singing. Today we're going to spend time on the seventh observation we made: created in God's image. **"Let Us make man [humankind] in Our image, according to Our likeness . . . God [bara-ed] man [humankind] in His own image, in the image**

**of God He [bara-ed] him, male and female He [bara-ed] them”**  
(1:26-27).

First, let's step back from these verses and speak to the larger context of this passage. Like you and every other human being alive today, I do not read Genesis 1 in a vacuum. Like you and every other human being alive today, I read **"Let us make man [humanity] in our image"** in the context of many conflicting claims about what it means to be human.

When you consider our world - the whole universe and we humans in it – our reality has to be studied and understood on many levels. These levels include theology, sociology, psychology, anthropology, zoology, botany, biology, chemistry, physics, and origins. We do not finally understand the world or ourselves until we take into consideration descriptions of reality from all these levels.

Physicists are right: we are complex packets of mysterious interacting energy forces. But that is not all we are. Chemists are right: atomic and subatomic particles and waves interact to form molecules and nonliving matter. We are complex chemical machines. But that is not all we are. Biologists are right: chemicals interact and combine to form more complex forms of life. We are complex cellular computers. But that is not all we are. Botanists and zoologists can describe us and our world further. Anthropologists and psychologists can tell us even more

about ourselves. Sociologists can add still more insight. And the theologians then relate it all to ultimate reality, to the Maker, Upholder, and Redeemer of the whole creation.

Again, the complete description of reality on one level does not preclude a complete description on another level. A complete biological description of the human being, for instance, does not do away with the need for a theological description of the human being. And a complete theological description does not do away with the need for a biological description of the human being. The problem emerges when one level thinks it knows the whole, and then ignores the insights of the other levels.

We now come back to the Genesis text: **"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."** (1:1). **"Then God said, 'Let us make man [humankind] in our image, according to our likeness'"** (v. 26).

Up to this point in Genesis 1, we have heard the Creator say, **"Let there be": "Let there be light"** (v. 3). **"Let there be an expanse"** (v. 6). **"Let the earth sprout vegetation"** (v. 11). But when it comes to the creation of human beings, the wording changes; God gets more personally involved. **"Let Us make man [humankind] in Our image, according to Our likeness."**

It is this level of understanding that our cultures are dying to know. The universe is not an accident. You are not an accident. Indeed, you are so much more than you know;

you are a creature created in the image and likeness of the Creator. A lot of books have been written on this, and rightly so. **“In Our image, according to Our likeness.”** This is profound! Now I’ll note that there does not appear to be any significant distinction between the terms “image” and “likeness.” In the rest of Scripture they are used interchangeably: in one place, “image,” in another, “likeness.”

Then as we read the text, two main facts about being human are being declared: (1) human beings are created to represent the Creator in the world and (2) human beings are created to reflect the nature and character of the Creator in the world. Representation and reflection.

Let’s look first at what we represent. In the ancient near East, when kings and emperors overcame new territories, they would set up an image, or likeness, of themselves to signify their sovereignty over the land and its people. Some kings and emperors still do this. The image, usually in the form of a statue, was the emperor's way of representing himself; it was a visible way to declare an ordinarily invisible fact. The image in some way represented the presence of the emperor. Indeed, the image somehow functioned "as the ruler in the place" of the emperor.

Do you see what Genesis 1 is revealing about us? It is something we never would have deduced on our own:

*God has made us to be His royal representatives in His creation, a kind a visible expression of an invisible reality.*

Are we then surprised that God says to Adam, **"Fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over..."** (Gen. 1:28)? The text is saying that exercising royal dominion over the earth as God's representatives is the basic purpose for which God created men and women. On the Creator's behalf, as His royal representatives we look after the creation. To care for the earth as the Creator cares – that is the key. Psalm 145:9 says, **"The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works."** That is the spirit in which we are to exercise our human dignity in the created order, with compassion over all He has made. This is part of the glory of being human.

Now let's look at our reflection. As the image and likeness of the Creator, we were created to reflect the Creator's nature and character. Imagine that! The rest of creation is to look at the human species and see the nature and character of God.

In Genesis 5:3 we read that Adam became a father again after losing Abel and Cain. The text says, **"He became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image."** Adam's son Seth somehow reflects the nature and character of Adam and Eve, and somehow we reflect the nature and character of God to one another and to the rest of creation. At one level we are a copy of our Maker.

What then do we reflect? Obviously, there's no way we can reflect everything about God's nature and character. We are, after all, finite creatures, so there's no way we can fully reflect the nature and character of the infinite Creator. We are not, and never will be, all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present – though some of us try to be!

So, what about God do we reflect? We reflect the capacity to create. We reflect the capacity to conceptualize; in Genesis 2 Adam named the animals, reflecting the ability to sort out the diversity of creation and put things into categories. We reflect the capacity to communicate; we are the creatures who can verbalize, expressing reality in words. This is no small miracle. We reflect the capacity to discern, to make moral judgments, though, as we all painfully know, that capacity has been damaged, in some cases severely so. We reflect the capacity to care. Of all the creatures on earth, we, like God, can put ourselves in others' shoes and feel what they feel.

Relationality is key here. Take careful note of the wording in the Genesis text. **“Let US,” “in Our image,” “according to Our likeness.”** It would seem that the major thing about God we were created to reflect is the “us-ness” of God.

From the beginning of the story, we meet a God who can use the plural pronoun. Indeed, the word for God in Hebrew (*Elohim*) is a plural noun, but it is always used with a singular verb. The God who creates us is the God

who speaks of Himself as “us.” Yes, the “us” could be the so-called royal “we,” used by Queens and Kings.

However, the living God is not a solitary diety using a royal we: the living God is a community. God’s use of “us” and “our” points to a mystery: within the one God there is somehow a plurality. In God’s own being there is a relationship: a free co-existence and co-operation. The living God exists in fellowship. The Genesis text is opening the door to what would later be understood as the Trinity. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The point of the Genesis text is making here is that we have been created to reflect this relational nature of our Creator. To put it more simply, humanity in the image of the Creator is humanity-in-relationship. God is relational, and we have been created to reflect that relationship-ness. Simon and Garfunkel’s great lyric *“I am a rock; I am an island”* is not humanity in the image of God. It’s a great song that expresses a feeling we may have, but we have been created relational. The song is instead describing our inhumanity. We were made relational for relationships, which is why broken relationships can sometimes hurt more than broken bones.

We were made for a relationship with the God who is relational. This means we finally know who we are when we know God personally. We finally know what it means to be human when we know the One who said, **“Let US create man and woman in OUR image.”**

The final relational observation I'll make about Genesis 1 is: the Creator creates us as sabbatical creatures, thus given enough time to rest and enjoy our Creator. That might be the hardest revelation to believe, but it's true.

Let me break some news to you. We humans are not the apex of creation; the apex is the Sabbath. This is one of those truths we'd never have deduced on our own. God has built into the very fabric of the created order a special day, the Sabbath day, a day to rest and enjoy our Creator.

Have you ever noticed that in the song of creation the seventh day does not end? Of every day of creation it's said, "**And there was evening and there was morning,**" but there is no "**and there was evening and morning, a seventh day.**" Day seven does not end. Day seven is the reason the Creator creates. God has created enough time for us to enjoy: love, rest, and play. We get to enjoy what the Creator has made and enjoy our Creator.

You see, in Genesis 1, although we watch God in boundless energy and creativity calling forth light and stars and fruit trees and sea monsters, there is more to God than what is revealed in all that work. Speaking creation into being did not exhaust God, but rather, the rest day of the Sabbath is the gift of enjoying creation with the Creator.

The Sabbath day to enjoy God fits with Jesus' desire to give us His Father, to welcome us home into His Father's house, and to give us rest. Jesus says in Matthew 11 what we can adapt for this, ***“Come to me, all who are weary and have overburdened yourselves, and I will give you rest. I will bring you back into that for which we (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) made you.”*** We may find it hard to believe Him, but it's true.

God did not get tired creating, but we do get tired. Our God who created us knows us so well that He knew we need rest and gave us the endless Sabbath to enjoy life. Rest, love, and play this Sabbath day. God made us for this.

(Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's *The Story of All Stories*.)