

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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The Beginning of Beginnings

Genesis 1

Russ Dean, June 10, 2007



The King of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, gives us the obvious starting point for this sermon and this series of sermons, when the white rabbit asks of the judge of the high court, "Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?"... "Begin at the beginning," the King [says], gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

In the beginning... Yes, a very good place to start, indeed.

But... when is the beginning? And where? And why, and how, and what!? Which beginning?¹

Now, didn't you just know I'd have to ask such an aggravating question? "Which beginning!?" Of course, we think of life in linear terms. My beginning was January 6, 1964. I hope not to see the end for quite some time. All I know of life, all I can know, revolves around the poles: "beginning" and "end."

For many readers of this text, all that is important is that word, "*In the beginning, God created...*" It's about chronology. The precise, first moment when "*God said, 'Let there be...'*" In 1658 James Ussher wrote in, *The Annals of the World*:

Which beginning of time [the Creation] according to our Chronologie, fell upon the entrance of the night preceding the twenty third day of October in the year of the Julian Calendar, 710 [i.e. B.C. 4004]...

¹ During our time of confession, Michael Kellett, our Minister with Youth and Children, conveyed to the congregation the fact that the Hebrew of verse one lacks the definite article "the," so this familiar (and definite-sounding) phrase may be translated with more literal precision (but implying less chronological precision): "in a beginning... while beginning..." or just "in beginning..." etc...

That now-famous Archbishop carefully surveyed all of the dates he could find in the scriptures and created a chronology of the world. Though the Bishop's followers are in limited supply today, there are still a handful of the faithful who believe on October 23, 6011 years ago, to the day, we had our beginning. A surprising percentage of 21st century Americans still hold to a "young earth" theology, a view that places the age of the universe at around 10,000 years. These believers hold that God created our earth as it is – all those stratified geological formations and supposed dinosaur bones only seem to indicate millions of years in formation.²

On the other end of the spectrum, some place our beginning, of no apparent reason, with no agent of causation, with a 15 billion year-old bang, that "sent the pieces flying."³ I pulled my old copy of Steven Hawking's, *A Brief History of Time*, off the shelf, to brush up on my astro-physics, and I read this:

In real time, the universe has a beginning and an end at singularities that form a boundary to space-time and at which the laws of science break down. But in imaginary time, there are no singularities or boundaries. So maybe what we call imaginary time is really more basic, and what we call real is just an idea that we invent to help us describe what we think the universe is like... So it is meaningless to ask: which is real, "real" or "imaginary" time? It is simply a matter of which is the more useful description.⁴

² There are those who believe that God simply put the "dinosaur bones" in the earth. I can't fathom what logic they apply in such a belief. If God was just testing, trying to fool the scientists, or the faint of faith, God has done a marvelous job!

³ This phrase is from a wonderful song by David Wilcox called, "Big Mistake." Wilcox challenges the idea that such an incredible universe (one which displays creatures with consciousness and love) could be simply happenstance, what he calls a "mistake." "They taught us kids in school, between the recess breaks, that the universe just sort of fell together like a big mistake. It started with a bang that sent the pieces flying, then it cooled and twirled into dinosaurs and dandelions..."

⁴ Hawking, p.139. I have no idea what "imaginary time" is, but it is fascinating to me that the leading scientists of the day have to speak in such whimsical language to try to describe the complexity of the universe. It is clear that their language has become poetic or symbolic or mythological – in order to describe a reality that defies simple, literal prose. The Christian Church would do well to recognize that scriptural and doctrinal language works the same way, i.e., "*in the beginning*" is symbolic language that represents a reality much greater than the first literal moment of our world's existence.

Totally baffling though he may be, if I get to choose a “more useful description” of our “beginning,” I’ll choose Hawking over Bishop Ussher, any day, for this amazing tale of creation, which is of inestimable value, especially to a 21st century world, says almost nothing to us about our chronological beginning. It is a useful description of something much more important. The New Revised Standard translation makes clear this distinction by rendering not, “*In the beginning, God created...*” but, “*In the beginning when God created...*”⁵

In commentary on this passage, Terrence Fretheim of Luther Seminary says,

The word *beginning* probably does not refer to the absolute beginning of all things, but to the beginning of the ordered creation, including the temporal order. Time began with God’s ordering... . God’s creative work... begins with something already there, the origins of which are of no apparent interest (to the writer)...⁶

What our story tells us is not that God made every single thing there is. (Please stay with me.) Or that God caused the beginning of all there is. (God, in fact, may be the source of what we call, in scientific terms, matter, God may be why the “Big Bang” banged to begin with [I am comfortable with these affirmations] – but this is not what our story aims to make clear.) Our story tells us that when God began to create... the stuff of the universe (which apparently was already there) was formless... there was a “deep” out there – but there was no “depth,” if you will; the universe may have been endless when God began to create, but there was no “end” (purpose, aim, goal). So the Wind of God *swept over the face of the lifeless deep*, the Spirit of God, the *Logos* or Logic of God, the

⁵ Perhaps I overstate the case, but the distinction is implied if not “made clear.” (I believe it is the intent of this translation to draw attention to the imprecision of the language – an imprecision which many scholars believe is there specifically because the writer has something less precise, but more important in mind, than the specific day of our literal beginning.)

⁶ Fretheim, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, “Genesis,” p.342.

Creative Initiative of God... Love, which is God, swept over all that was... and there was – then, and only then – a real beginning!⁷

Thursday, on Diane Rehm’s radio show, a guest host interviewed Barbara Bisantz Raymond, the author of a book called, *The Baby Thief*. The book chronicles the story of a Memphis social worker named Georgia Tann, whose abusive tactics in coercing women to give their children up for adoption resulted in a change in our nation’s adoption laws. One caller on the line asked for advice: “Can I trust anything on my birth certificate? Since it names my adoptive parents as my birth parents, can I trust that my date of birth, or my birth place, is accurate?”

Barbara Raymond quickly identified with this young man who wants to know, needs to know, his birth parents – especially his birth mother. It is a common quest, she said, even for many happy and satisfied and well-adjusted adopted children. Who is my biological mother? My father? Where was I born? The young man who called was not asking about the stuff of his existence. That he is living, breathing, is obviously not in question. His quest is about his life, his purpose, his identity – his real beginning.⁸

⁷ As much of my preaching reveals (perhaps too much), I am in a constant dialogue with the scientific philosophy of materialism, which claims there is no evidence that God “created the world,” and since this can be demonstrated, the whole “God” idea is discredited. Scientists have shown the creation of organic matter from inorganic (in the laboratory), and can theorize from this the existence of our world, as it is, by evolution, “guided” only by pure, random chance (which is to say, completely unguided). I do not believe such a (theological) statement can be demonstrated by science – but I am willing to consider their hypothesis and ask, “If this is so... is there, in fact, no room for ‘God’ in the equation?” If God was not “necessary” for the creation of the world (even a literal reading of the creation narrative allows that “matter” in fact existed “when God created...”), has God been pushed out of the picture? This sermon is really the hint of an extended theology that suggests that even if God is not “necessary,” in scientific terms, God is the “more than necessary” source of that gives depth and purpose and direction, sacred value and eternal meaning, to a basic, biological life.

⁸ Amy questioned me about this illustration on Sunday afternoon. Because she has a sister who adopted two children, we are all sensitive to the issues surrounding adoption. Amy felt the illustration would have been better made, would have followed the logic of my sermon more, to say that it was the young man’s adoptive family who gave meaning and purpose to his life, his adoptive parents who were the real source of

In the beginning... when God created... then was the beginning – to all beginnings.

It was a beginning that never ends!

In 1942, writing of the Battle of Egypt, Winston Churchill said, “This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” The creative work that God initiated with a breath of fresh air will never be finished.

When parents continue God’s creative work by bringing children into the world – God is giving us a new beginning.⁹ When the church invites these blessed creatures in to the story of faith – God is giving us a new beginning.¹⁰ When relationships that have failed, whether with a spouse, a child, parents, a neighbor, or co-worker, and we find new life through forgiveness, reconciliation – God is giving us a new beginning. And the story of Jesus dares us to believe there is no end to God’s creative beginnings – even death leads to new life. A new beginning.

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said to the white rabbit, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.” The affirmation of the people of God is that there is no end to God’s beginnings: “*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth,*” said the prophet Isaiah. “*Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating...* (Isaiah 65.17).

Always creating. Always forgiving. Always beginning.

The poet T.S. Eliot says, “In the beginning is my end.” Our end is with God. Our purpose is in God. May we have a new beginning – even today.

his “beginning,” not the woman and man who simply created his biological life. She may be right. I did think carefully about using this illustration, but there was a sincerity and a longing in the caller’s voice that spoke to me about the intensity of his quest. I mean no disrespect to adoptive parents. I affirm Amy’s interpretation, and know from our experience the power and meaning of the adoptive experience.

⁹ Someone gave us a beautiful calligraphy work at the birth of our first child. “Every birth brings with it the hope that God is not disappointed in humanity. – Tagore”

¹⁰ Our service began with the parent/child dedication service for young Gregory Reid Heaton.

May it be so!