

## **A Bible Study:**

### **What God Did on the 8<sup>th</sup> Day**

One Sunday morning following a worship service one of my congregants asked me a question that stopped me in my tracks. It's not often that I have such questions asked immediately following a sermon. Most of the time they are traditional pleasantries, "Thank you for that sermon," "I needed that message," something like that. This question came from a man I knew to have an insatiable curiosity about all things related to theology, but especially creation theology. He was a bio-chemist who worked at a major research institute in the Research Triangle Park in the Raleigh-Durham part of North Carolina. On this particular Sunday I had preached a sermon on creation from Genesis 1, so he asked the question, "What did God do on the 8<sup>th</sup> day?" Some questions stop you in their tracks because they are simultaneously simple and profound. I had always considered myself an intellectually curious person, but I was almost embarrassed I didn't have a thoughtful answer in my back pocket. I recall saying something banal like, "I suppose he went back to work." That answer, however, begged the question. If God did go "back to work," what kind of work did he do?

We often look at the stories of Genesis 1-11 as origin stories. They teach us about the origins of creation, plants, animals, man and woman (Gen 1-2), sin and suffering (Gen 3-4), restoration (Gen 6-9) and culture (Gen 11). While it is very true these stories do convey the Israelite understanding of the origin of all aspects of life in this world, they also lay the foundation for the continuing work of God in the world. When we limit the origin stories to one originating event we miss out on the dynamic character within the stories themselves. What God did on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of creation is continue to work through the created order to accomplish his divine purposes.

This lesson will highlight some scriptural texts which reveal the ongoing creative activity of God in a world originating in him.

## **I. Noah's Covenant: Ongoing Work**

When we think of the story of Noah's Ark we often focus on how God used an obedient man to reboot a world that had degenerated into utter wickedness. The animals are a cute side show that converts this terrible story of global destruction into a children's tale. We can miss the intentionality of God to insure not only the perpetuation of the human race, but also the fullness of the animal eoc-system.

When Noah, his family and the animals finally came off the ark which had sheltered them during the storm, God initiated the first covenant recorded in the Bible.

Read the covenant that God made with Noah in Genesis 9:1-17.

- With whom is the covenant made?
- What is the time frame of the covenant?
- What does this say about the dynamic nature of God's future work?
- Most covenants in the Bible include the promises of God and the demands of God in response. What are the promises and demands in this covenant? Reflect on your answer to this question and what it might mean for us today.

## **II. Isaiah's Prophecy: Future Work**

Throughout the Old Testament there are evidences of God's dynamic relationship with the creation. When Israel was in the throes of Babylonian captivity God made another promise to Israel. Near the end of the prophecy of Isaiah God declared he would continue to create in the future. Israel had a long history of travail from the days of oppression in the land of Egypt to ongoing conflict with native peoples in the Promised Land. There were, in addition, the troubles deriving from their own sin and infidelity to the God of the fathers. But now, God was going to do a new thing.

Read Isaiah 65;17-25

- What do you think the significance is of God creating "*new heavens and a new earth*" and not just "*a new heaven*"?

- There are a number of beautiful elements of this new creation that recall the bliss of the Garden of Eden before the fall of humankind. What are some of these and how might they shape our current view of the created order? (no crying, no premature deaths, no plunder from enemies, wolf and lamb lying down together)

### **III. John's Vision: Place of God's Work**

Another interesting element of God's activity in the future is where it will take place. John's vision is often assumed to take place in heaven, up in the sky or beyond the sky. Yet, the actual language John uses leaves more of an impression that God is coming down to earth, rather than calling people up to heaven. *"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God"* (Rev. 21:2). This was followed by a loud voice declaring, *"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them"* (Rev. 21:3).

Read Rev. 21:1-4

- What do you think the significance is that God is coming down to earth, rather than calling people up to heaven?
- The first earth, John declares, *"had passed away"* (v 1). There are those who read John's vision and conclude it doesn't really matter what we do to this earth because God is going to create a new one any way. Do you agree or disagree with this view? Why or why not?
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### **IV. The Incarnation: The Climax of God's Word**

The climax of God's creation was revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ – the Word made flesh. It was the mysteriously sacred coming together of the One who was fully God and fully man. He was from heaven and earth, fully spiritual and fully physical, all at once. This doctrine of the incarnation served as an orthodox counterweight to an ongoing heresy that plagued the early church and still finds its way to our thinking and preaching. Gnosticism was a dualistic philosophy that

divided all things into spiritual and material. The spiritual was good and the material was evil. Therefore, the body was considered evil and the immaterial soul was considered good. The purpose of life was to free oneself from the material and fully embrace the spiritual. Gnostics in the early church had trouble with the incarnation of Jesus because of their views about the evils of the body. A good God would certainly not take on the material world--something so blatantly evil--in the form of human flesh.

This gnostic view, though it was repudiated by the early church fathers and the first ecumenical councils (Nicea in 325 and Chalcedon in 451) has continued to infect the church. It has contributed to this idea of a private faith and an abstract love that does little beyond transporting a disembodied soul to heaven at the time of death. It has distorted the Christian faith and the interaction of the Christian with the world. The spiritual has been emphasized and the material ignored.

Early Christian theologians regularly linked creation and salvation. Every phase of Jesus' physical life on earth had spiritual, even cosmic meaning. -- birth from a mother, baptism in a river, feeding people fish, instituting the Lord's Supper (Eucharist) with bread and wine, physical death and physical resurrection. Athanasius, the great 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop from Alexandria taught that the incarnation of Jesus was the decisive event for all creation, not just the means for souls to go to heaven. In Jesus' physical body the sin-fueled division between Creator and creation is healed. That's because he was the perfect unity of Creator and creation, fully God and fully man.

Read Col. 1:15-16

- Jesus, the Son of God, was the firstborn of all creation AND all things were created through him. Notwithstanding the mystery of this, what is the significance of all things being created through Jesus, the Son of God?
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Read Eph. 1:7-10

- How might this passage be used to challenge the heresy of gnosticism?
- What do you think it means for Jesus Christ to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth?

Application: If God's work of creation is past, present and future, and culminating in Jesus Christ, what does this mean for us as disciples of Jesus Christ? How is our discipleship affected by creation and what is our affect on creation to be?

Application: Think of ways your church can connect the creation with Christian discipleship? What are theologically richer ways to think about discipleship and creation? What are practical ways to carry out our discipleship?

Exercise: Create a small group proposal for your group or your church that would embody a more intentional act of Christian discipleship in relation to the Creation. Think through how this proposal is part of the ongoing creation work of God.

For Further Study: "**From Nature to Creation**" by Norman Wirzba, Retrieved from <https://normanwirzba.com/files.wordpress.com/2015/10/from-nature-to-creation-ch-1.pdf>