

We began our all-church read of Scripture this week that we are calling “Journey Together: One Word. One Year.” And I wonder how far you got before you started asking questions? I was reading the newspaper a week or so ago, the comics, and I came across Hagar the Horrible, maybe you saw it. Hagar is standing with his sidekick, Lucky Eddie, late at night looking up into the heavens. Hagar says, “Look at the magnificent display of stars in the nighttime sky. It sure makes you stop and think, doesn’t it?” After a long pause Lucky Eddie turns and says, “No.”

Most of us, in some way or another, at some time or another, for some reason or another, look around and begin to ask the question, “How did all of this come to be? Where did it come from? Who made it? Is the world a good place or an evil place? What does it all mean?” These are the questions of the ages, ours and countless generations who have gone before us, and in every generation attempts are made to give answers, but those answers are not always easy to come by, and the ones we get depend on who we ask.

So, as people of faith, we turn to Scripture to find answers to our most profound questions and in the opening chapters, the opening verse really, we hear this pronouncement: “*In the beginning God.*” Here we are told, in no uncertain terms, it all began this way. “*In the beginning God ...*”

Now how are we to understand these words, this telling of the creation story? It is rather difficult to know how to read this text. It is not really history because no one was there to witness it. And it is not exactly science because it was clearly written in a pre-scientific age and hardly uses the language of the textbook, much less the laboratory. Some suggest it is myth, but that makes it sound fanciful and untrue. Theologian Karl Barth calls it saga because it uses imaginative language to describe what is beyond human experience. Many refer to it as being poetry, but I like to think of it as being an overture.

Think for a moment of your favorite Broadway musical – mine would be *Les Mis*, yours may be *Cats* or *Guys and Dolls*. For our sake, let’s just say it is Rogers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma*. Imagine yourself in your seat at the theater and as the hour nears, the lights dim and before the curtain opens, the conductor lifts the baton and the orchestra plays what we call the overture. The overture introduces us to the themes and story line of the play we are about to see - through the lilt of “*Oh What a Beautiful Morning*,” the romance of “*People Will Say We’re in Love*,” the deep sadness of “*Poor Jud is Daid*,” and so on, ending with the glorious refrain of “OKLAHOMA,” as the curtain rises and the show begins.

Just as the overture in a Broadway production introduces all the major musical themes of the play, themes that we will hear over and over again, so the opening chapters of Genesis do much the same. Clearly what is written here is beyond the scope of human experience or the capacity of human language to describe it, so what we have here is a singer singing a song of praise to the Creator of the universe. So what are the themes we hear in this overture of praise?

The very first words of Scripture tell us almost everything we really need to know, “*In the beginning God*,” not chance, not a mistake, not a coincidence, but God.

Notice that the writer doesn't make any attempt to describe or define God, or even explain what he means when he uses the word "God." This is not an explanation, it is a statement; it is an affirmation of faith. Like we recite in the first article of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." *In the beginning God.*

Where did it all come from? "*In the beginning God created.*" Again, this is a declaration, not an explanation. It doesn't answer all of our "how" questions, but it does answer the more important "who" question. "*In the beginning God created.*" If we put everything in the universe in to an equation with one side being everything that is "created" and on the other side everything that is "not created". On the "not created" side would be God and God alone, and on the "created" side would be everything else in the universe. Our faith asserts that God alone is the uncreated One. "*In the beginning God created*" which begs the question, then who created God? What was before God? Here is the only way I can understand and explain this nearly non-understandable, inexplicable concept. Think of what you consider to have been present at the very beginning of creation- a mass, a chemical, an atom, a force of energy, whatever you think of as being the starting point. Now just before that is God because God made that. If you can think of something more elemental still, then just before that is God. God is the Mover, the Initiator, the Creator, and there was no before before God. And not to steal our thunder, but a year from now we will come to the end of the story and we will discover that just after the end, however we may conceive that end to be, is God. So the central affirmation of our faith is this: in the beginning God and in the end God.

We also see in the creation story that as God created He paused periodically and made a pronouncement. He called what He made "*good.*" He created the heavens and the earth and called it "*good.*" He spoke into being the sea and the land, the sun and the moon and the stars and called them all "*good.*" He made the plants and the trees, the fish and all of the animals, and after each new creation He pronounced it all "*good*". And then, as His crowning achievement, He created human beings in His own image and likeness. In Genesis 1:27 we read, "*So God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them,*" and at the end of this part of creation He said it was "*very good.*" Humanity, you and I, are the highlight of God's creation. We have the high dignity of being created in the very image of God. That means that you and I, and every other person, male and female, young and old, is stamped in the image of God, and if we carry His image it means we belong to Him. To be made in the image of God means that we have been created as moral, ethical, rational, spiritual beings who have the capacity to be loving and responsible and creative. We are creatures who have been created to have a unique relationship with the Creator, and each of us has a God-given identity and dignity worthy of respect and care and honor.

Yet as we look around at this created order it is not always self evident that it is good. If we were created in love for loving goodness, it surely begs the question, "What happened?" And Scripture is plain to tell us that sin entered the picture, and the harmony and perfection of the creation was shattered. Adam blamed it on Eve and Eve blamed it on the serpent, and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on. Blame it on whoever we want, but if it hadn't been one of them it likely would have been one of us. Sin entered the world through disobedience, disobedience to God's clearly stated laws for living.

This, too, is a theme we will witness over and over again as we journey through the narrative of Scripture.

Our relationship with God, the creatures with the Creator, is based on clearly established rules and laws and expectations, and these are to be obeyed and maintained, not for our punishment or to constrain us, but to enrich us and set us free. When we live as God intends there is blessing, and when we don't, when we disobey, there is judgment and punishment and curse. We don't need to read very far in to the story before we encounter lies and deception and murder. No wonder this is a best seller.

Our willful disobedience leads to God's judgment and banishment from the paradise of the garden, which is a reminder to us that God is in control, He always has been and always will be. He is Lord and we are not. He is the owner and we are simply the caretakers, the stewards of His creation, and we forget the order of that relationship and our obedience to His laws only at our own peril. Our God is a holy God who demands loyalty and devotion and His judgment and punishment are sure, but that doesn't mean His love for us ever changes.

We read, after the man and the woman ate of the forbidden fruit they looked at one another and for the very first time they saw their nakedness and were ashamed. Then they heard the sound of God walking in the garden, coming to be with them, and they hid. So God called to them, "*Where are you?*" This is the first question asked in the Bible and it will take the remainder of the Bible to answer it. Since the beginning God has been on a desperate search to find us and reclaim us and restore us into the right relationships He desires for us. Why? Simply, because He loves us, and that part of the story will culminate in the coming of Jesus.

There are many, many other themes that we will find repeated over and over again throughout the narrative of Scripture, but they all fall under three very broad categories: creation, redemption and sanctification. God made us. God claims us in His love. God refines us to His good purposes.

For centuries these stories about God and the creation of the universe and the giving of life were carried in an oral tradition. Long before the printing press, or pen and paper, or leather scrolls or papyrus, these stories were passed generation to generation, parent to child. If we can allow ourselves to hear these ancient texts in this way we can almost picture a gathering of people sitting around a communal fire on a star lit night, or sitting at a banquet table during a cultic feast, when the youngest among them asks the question all have asked before him, "How did all of this come to be? Where did it all come from? Who made it? Is it intended for good or for evil? What does it all mean?" And with a voice from the ages, the Elder among them stands, clears his throat and says, "It all began this way. *In the beginning God ...*" And as he speaks, the curtain rises and the journey begins.