



Small Group Discussion Guide – March 12, 2017

In the Beginning: The Garden of Eden

From Pastor Hamilton's sermon:

Let's begin with what Genesis 1 is not: this magnificent opening chapter of the Bible is not a science lesson. Those who read it as science often want to explain how the universe really was created in six literal days 6,000 years ago. But Genesis 1 is not written as an article for a scientific journal. It is written as poetry with a beautiful rhythm. It is a liturgy that serves as a creed, outlining several foundational beliefs upon which the rest of Judaism and Christianity are built. The point of Genesis 1 was not to tell us about the **how** of creation, but to tell us the **Who** of creation and the **why**.

Every culture I'm aware of in the Ancient Near East had creation stories. Among the best known are the Enuma Elish, The Epic of Gilgamesh, and the Atra-hasis epic.... What is most interesting is to see how Genesis 1 differs from the others.

For instance, the other stories hold that there were multiple gods—at least two, and in some cases an entire pantheon. Genesis tells us there was only one God, called *Elohim* in Genesis 1 and Yahweh in Genesis 2-3. In some of the other stories creation comes from conflicts between the gods. In Genesis creation occurs out of God's creativity and grace. In some of the other accounts the gods create human beings as servants or slaves whose job is to feed the gods and to meet their needs. In the Bible, God creates the world to sustain and bless human beings. In some of the creation stories the kings alone are created in the image of the gods and given authority over creation. In Genesis every human is created in God's image and given dominion over the earth....

The Genesis 1 account offers a picture of God who creates Paradise as a home for human beings, whom he cares for, a home that is beautiful and very good.... Genesis 1:3 reads, "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good." This is the poetry of Genesis 1: God speaks and calls forth some element of creation. In response to God's words, the thing itself is brought forth. Then God sees that it is good....

There are three fundamental assertions in this creation account:

1. **Everything owes its existence to God.**
2. **The garden and everything in it, at its inception, was good and beautiful – reflecting God’s beauty and goodness.**
3. **Our lives, and all of creation, belong to God, and are a gift from God.**

This calls for a specific response from us. We’re meant to live lives of gratitude. Our fundamental posture in life is thanksgiving. None of us knows how long we will live, but we’re grateful for life today. Life may be hard and challenging at times, but it is still a gift. Throughout the Bible we’re told to give thanks. Paul captures it in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

- Which of the three fundamental assertions Pastor Hamilton identifies in the Genesis 1 creation story is easiest for you to believe and live into? Is there any of the three that you must “stretch” to accept and trust?

From Pastor Hamilton’s sermon:

Let’s turn to what the text says about human beings: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. [And] God blessed them.”

I love how in this first creation account the man and the woman were created at the same time—not separately, as in the second account we’ll study next week, with the woman created later to be a companion and helper for the man. Here they are both made in the image of God. There is an equality and shared dignity here.

To be created in the image of God does not mean we look like God. It means we have an ability to think, reason, love, give, and create in a way that exceeds God’s other creatures. We are moral beings. He gave us the ability to make decisions, to make moral choices. We call this free will. Are you reflecting the image of God to others?

In other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories, humans are created to be slaves of the gods. God creates all humans in his image and gives us authority or dominion. Some have thought that means that we can do what we want to the earth—overharvest it, use it up, rape it. But the Hebrew word for dominion or rule often describes the rapport of a shepherd and his sheep, or God and his people. If our dominion over the earth and the animals is like God’s over us, it means we seek to truly care for and protect creation. We are meant to rule over our world as those who will answer to God for our care of his earth. I am reminded of Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting, whose motto was in part, LEAVE THIS WORLD A LITTLE BETTER THAN YOU FOUND IT.

Part of your mission is to live up to the image of God. That means we are most fully and authentically human when we act like the God revealed in Jesus Christ. We are most human when we love, when we practice justice, when we are caring and kind. We are called each day to re-present God to others. And the second thing about your life mission given by God in Genesis 1 is that we are to care for the planet on God’s behalf. A biblical view of creation and our role on this planet calls us to care for and steward this planet and its resources.

- Part of your life mission is to live up to the image of God. In what ways are you positive that you are doing that? In what areas does that challenge you to grow?
- Another part of your life mission is to care for the planet on God's behalf. How do you do that? What more would you aim to do in caring for God's planet?

From Pastor Hamilton's sermon:

I'd end with the conclusion of this story, Genesis 2:2-4: "[God] rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation."

Some of the other creation stories from the Ancient Near East tell us that the gods rested after they created humankind, and they kept resting, and counted on humans to do the work and to feed them through their sacrifices. Theirs was a life of leisure while humans served them. But Genesis offers a very different picture. God rested on the seventh day, hallowing the day and declaring it a day of rest for all creatures—not only for humans, but also for the animals that worked in the fields.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, once noted that if he ruled the world, "I would enact one institution that has the power to transform the world. It's called the Sabbath." He noted that no other civilization in the ancient world mandated a day for everyone, slaves and free and animals, to rest—to stop work and to simply be. This was certainly unknown among the ancient near eastern creation stories.

I wonder what would happen if we reclaimed Sabbath? If we actually had a day where we as Christians might observe, as the observant Jews do, a day without social media, without working. A day for reading, eating, worshiping, being with people and talking about things that renew our soul. My life seems so often to be spinning out of control. There are books to write, people to visit, things to be done around the house that I didn't get done during the week. What would happen if you stopped your normal pace of life one day in seven, and spent time reading, renewing, praying, playing, and of course giving thanks?

So, here's a bit of what I want you to take away from our look at God's garden, Eden or Paradise, in Genesis 1:

—The Genesis 1 creation account is not science, but liturgy and creed intended to tell us not the how, but the who and why of creation.

—The story should lead us to a basic orientation of gratitude in our lives. I invite you give thanks to God at least five times a day.

—I want you to remember that your life mission is to reflect the image of God to others, and to care for God's creation.

—Genesis 1 invites us to take seriously the idea of Sabbath—a day to stop doing, and to start being, resting, renewing and rejoicing.

- If you put down your regular work one day in seven, how do you spend that day? Is it busier than other days as you catch up on chores, shopping and the like, is it a day for your own pleasure(s), or do you use it in ways that connect you more fully to God? If your life simply doesn't have room for a Sabbath, what steps can you take to move toward that practice, both for your sake and for God's?