

Four Sermons on Genesis 1

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Sermon 2 - Creation Aesthetics

Introduction

In 2003 I had the privilege of visiting Iguacu Falls in Brazil, the site of the film *The Mission*. Iguacu Falls lies near the borders of Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina.

But it was not just the falls that caught my attention. I also loved the roadside stalls, where a wonderful range of local wares were sold.

One morning, I purchased four colourful hand-woven handbags from an indigenous lady on a side street. With the help of an interpreter, I learned that she was from the Maca people, a small people group who live mainly in Paraguay. I asked her why the handbags were so colourful and so intricately decorated, and discovered that each handbag tells a story about its owner and their status in the community – to this day I think her wide smile was because I had probably just purchased a bag for myself that said I was a pregnant, middle-aged lady lost in the jungle!

Well, I also discovered that in the Maca language, the word *to write* is the same word as *to weave*. That is, the Maca make an intrinsic connection between storytelling and artefact-making, between the hand-written and the hand-woven, between narrative and art.

And it is my contention that just such a deep connection occurs in Genesis 1, where the story is beautifully and artistically told. Genesis 1 in Hebrew is a poetic creation, a story woven by God the Artist with all the care and attention of a Maca weaving woman. This is why God *says* (story) “Let us *make* (artistry)...”¹

So “Let those who have ears to hear, hear!”

The Artistry of Creation

And what an unexpected tale is before us, because I would like to suggest that Genesis 1 is a love story – Creation is a love story.

But it is an understated love, a shy love, disclosed along the way, a love only known when encountered, the love of a firm hand on the shoulder, a love not broadcast in advance, not tuned into by wireless networks but soaked up by subterranean roots.

¹ Creation is depicted as a kind of artistic invention, a kind of playfulness.

God, the Thoughtful One, appears in Genesis 1 without a history, without a biography; no bragging heralds this One's devoted shaping of words and worlds.

God the Artisan makes everything that is, heaven and earth. There is nothing that God does not make.

And then God pauses. The Thoughtful One lingers, as Spirit hovering over chaotic waters. God is at home in the disorder chaos, in the yet-to-be-formed places of creation. But these vacant places were also created by God. Chaos is not the underside of creation; God is not at war with darkness, trying to overcome it to bring the best out of a bad situation. Rather, the watery chaos is the dormant rumblings of the world waiting for The Thoughtful One to bring it graciously to abundance.²

The Softly Spoken One then speaks, "Let there be light". And so the music begins, the song of creation.³ Job writes, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ... when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"⁴

This is the song of creation, the musical score of Genesis, that is continuously unfolded by grace and without necessity by the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit, eternally communing in shared joy and delight.

In Psalm 96 we read that the heavens rejoice, the earth is glad, the fields are joyful, and the trees of the forest celebrate before the Lord.⁵

In Proverbs this symphony of creation is echoed when wisdom is said to be present in creation. Wisdom means *skilful living*, thus the language discloses creation as skilfully and carefully shaped by God. "Then I [the Lady Wisdom] was like the craftswoman at God's side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in God's presence, rejoicing in God's whole world and delighting in humankind."⁶

Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century bishop and theologian, described creation as a wonder-filled hymn to the glory of the Almighty; the order of the universe is a kind

² The underside of creation is thus "quite simply, nothing at all". God made everything out of nothing. And this nothingness does not challenge God, as God is already and always complete. Theologians call this *creatio ex nihilo*. Not as in the myth of progress, which is a sort of reverse Gnosticism freeing itself from the entropy of collapse. Hart, *The beauty of the infinite: The aesthetics of Christian truth*, p. 258.

³ An analogy that came to be known as *musica mundana* or *harmonia mundi*. I am indebted to Hart, *The beauty of the infinite*, pp. 275ff for the elaboration of this idea.

⁴ Job 38:4, 7

⁵ Psa 96:11–13.

⁶ Proverbs 8:30–31. Also Proverbs 3:19–20, Pro 3:19 "The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; 20 by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew." Again, Isaiah 45:18 "For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): I am the LORD, and there is no other."

of musical harmony, richly toned, intermingling its song with the song of God's love.

Augustine, another 4th century bishop and theologian, saw the beauty of the world like the beauty of a poem, with its musical cadences and evocative language.

And to make sure we soak up this intimate delight-filled liturgy of creation in our reading of Scripture, Revelation replays it for us again in the great hymn of chapter 4: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will, [by your pleasure], they existed and were created."

The language of creation, the grammar of creation, therefore is first that of perfect beauty, of artistic delight, of playful narration, like the language used to describe the river in *Wind in the Willows*,

"Never in his life had [Mole] seen a river before – this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh. ... All was a-shake and a-shiver – glints and gleams and sparkles, rustle and swirl, chatter and bubble. ... [Mole] sat on the bank, while the river still chattered on to him, a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea."⁷

Creation we could say is a "babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea."

To listen to Genesis 1 is to hear the music of pleasure, of beauty, of the purest joy, and to speak of creation is to speak of delight and grace and poetry; no other language is appropriate.

The Days of Creation

And so the Softly Spoken One weaves creation threads on the loom of a seven day week, a deep and profound metaphorical structure of beginnings and middles and ends, and seasons and rhythms.⁸

Day One is wrought of spoken light; it is bathed in light, a radiance of pure goodness, separated from darkness so that day and night might alternate as the world's metronome, evening and morning, evening and morning, evening and morning.

⁷ Kenneth Grahame, *The wind in the willows*, ch. 1.

⁸ For this purpose, the week is the ideal metaphorical vehicle, as day is too short and month is too long. So to include temporality, a crucial aspect of creation that conveys the cumulativeness of God's work, the week is ideal.

And thus the *giving* begins. Day One gives itself, that is, it gives *a Day* to Day Two, and then to Day Three, Four, Five, Six, and then, unexpectedly, Creation even gives a Day to God for rest, a Day “for [God’s] stretching out ... in luxurious contentment”⁹.

Day Two is a Sky-making Day, a Sky given to separate water from water, above from below.

Day Two then gives to Day Three the waters below the Sky, to be further separated into Land and Sea.

And God sees the goodness of all these places: Light, Sky, Land, and Sea.

But Day Three is not finished. Not by a long mile. God says to the Land, I have given you your place, now you can give of yourself, by bringing forth plants and trees, and they in turn can give their seed and fruit. Giving spawns more giving. God creates spaces which in turn create life. By granting reproductive potential to the world, God, as pure love, does not insist on getting God’s own way.¹⁰

And this is good too. Not just things in and of themselves are good, but their intrinsic generativity is also good and delightful.

So Days 1–3 progress through the creation of Light, Sky, Land and Sea. And from here, Days 4-6 receive these gifted spaces of Days 1-3 and fill each in turn with its indigenous members.¹¹ In other words, the universe is ordered in such a way that God-directed separation leads to God-blessed saturation.¹²

Day 4 receives the Light space and fills it with sun and moon and quasars, supernovas and shooting stars. And these lights give their own gift, for they determine days and months and years. The simple rhythm of morning and evening is overlaid with the syncopated drumbeats of tides and years, winter and summer, spring and autumn.

Day 5 receives the Sea space and God populates it with swarming creatures, plankton and sea snakes, coral and starfish. The Thoughtful One then fills the Sky space with flying creatures, kestrels and hawks, finches and nightingales.

Day Six takes the Earth space, dappled by the gift of fruitful vegetation, and God fills it with animals galore, rhinos and echidnas, llamas and water buffalos.

And then God, the Imageless One, gives God’s image to humankind. They are blessed and released to thrive and permeate the world.

⁹ JC Powys, though not in reference to God! The quote did not cite the original source.

¹⁰ 1 Cor 13:5, Love does not insist on its own way.

¹¹ Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, 2005, p.76 n. 89, notes that in medieval exegesis days 1-3 were called *opus distinctionis*, ‘work of separation’ and days 4-6 were called *opus ornatus*, ‘work of embellishment.’

¹² From the grass roots, one could say.

Creation is through and through sheer gift. After all is created, God says, “Look! I *give* you everything.”

“Look!” – an appeal to appreciate the creation, the magnificence of the world *as* world, the intricacies of its pleasurable-ness, expressed uniquely in each particular thing. God the Artist, teaches us how to see, as Van Gogh said of artists in general.¹³ “God, like all good artists, points us to the things that everyone is looking at but no one is seeing.”¹⁴

And then, after looking, after the sensory and aesthetic appreciation, after this embodied participation in creation’s witness to the splendour of God, God says “I *give* you.”

Fruit-bearing trees yield their gifts of fruit because the sun and the moon give the trees their necessary seasons and light and dark. These gifts are given to another of God’s gifts, humanity, who in turn in tender care, give back life to the same trees.¹⁵ The pure giving of creation spawns only more giving, as each thing finds its satisfaction in giving and receiving and multiplying and blessing. The totally unnecessary creation is bound together in a web of necessary dependencies, nourished by trust and friendship. This is the outward expression of the love and pleasure that is shared between Father, Son, and Spirit from all eternity.¹⁶

Thus creation must be received as a gift and as beauty, what biblical writers called *the glory of the Lord*.

The Softly Spoken One, having declared all of creation *very* good, then rests on Day 7, and listens in on the ongoing melodies of a world fully prepared to sing God’s song for all eternity.¹⁷

The literary beauty of Genesis 1

In the Hebrew text, one sees yet more artistry, in that The Seven Sacred Days of Genesis 1 are painted on a canvas weaved from *sevens*:

¹³ Vincent van Gogh, 1874, in letter to his brother Theo, with respect to Rembrandt’s work.

¹⁴ Ockert Meyer (pc) gave me this quote, derived from the work of Miskotte, *When the gods are silent*.

¹⁵ Ellen van Wolde, *Facing the earth: Primaeval history in a new perspective*, in *The World of Genesis; Persons, Places, Perspectives*. Ed. by Philip R. Davies & David J.A. Clines. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, pp. 22-47, points out that humans are given their stewardship in the context of the vegetation already been given into the stewardship of the sun and moon, who “rule” the seasons. Thus humanity’s governance occurs in a context of mutual governance and interdependence.

¹⁶ The inevitable expression of Trinitarian self-emptying (cf. Phil. 2) love.

¹⁷ When the melodies went awry and deviated from the original score, God so loved the creation that God gave yet again (John 3:16), as pointed out by Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, p. 297.

Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, p.74 writes “Superimposed on and integrated with the picture of God speaking creation into being is the metaphor of God as designer and artificer, constructing with care, attention, obvious pleasure, and self-investment (as a good artist) a coherent, harmoniously functioning cosmos, according to a well-thought out plan. This characterisation of God as maker or artisan is rhetorically embedded in the superb literary artistry of the creation story.”

Seven days, seven times “And it was so”, seven times, “And God saw that it was good”, seven words in the first verse, fourteen words in the second verse, fourteen mentions of day, twenty one mentions of earth, thirty five words for the seventh day, thirty five mentions of God, seven times sixty-seven words altogether¹⁸, and my favourite, seven mentions of creepy-crawlies.¹⁹

Genesis 1 is replete with an orderliness, a symmetry, with a certain slowness. It is not the sterile orderliness of a doctor’s surgery, of filing cabinets and manila folders, but the exuberant organisation of abundance, congruence, anticipation, of a world that allows all things to flourish. It is a thriving assemblage of beings at home with each other in deep contentment.

The End of Gnosticism

What is often shocking to contemporary readers, Christians included, it that *that’s all there is to it*, literally, because God created *the heavens and the earth*, God created *everything*.

To listen to Genesis 1 is to find oneself in a world under which no other world exists.²⁰

That is, creation theology dethrones Gnosticism, which in every age is the greatest threat to biblical Christianity. Gnosticism says that *underneath* the created world lies a deeper, more meaningful world where *the real stuff happens*. Gnosticism says that this world is ultimately under the influence of some other non-material world that is more important, more significant, more spiritual. Thus Gnosticism is world-denying and can tolerate no doctrine of beauty, no aesthetic of divine self-giving joy.²¹

Thus creation one could say is only skin-deep – there is no abstract principle guiding it, no deeper layer. You can’t drill down to a more profound truth. But it is a thickly-textured skin nevertheless, a skin encompassing all the physical, spiritual, biological, and psychological realities there are.

The splendour of creation lies precisely in its particularity, the goodness of *this eucalyptus* or *that wombat* or *these geese*. Which is why we see God’s glory in its fullest in Christ. “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact

¹⁸ In 1:1-2:3, as pointed out by Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, p. 83.

¹⁹ As far as I know, no one has pointed this last one out before! Middleton also elucidates in great detail the artistic sophistication of the Hebrew text.

²⁰ In Christian theology, therefore, all of creation is *groundless*, in having no origin in *itself*. The sheer givenness of creation is foundational for all Christian theology, because it establishes a world that is thoroughly holistic. There is no Gnostic foundation to build upon, or Gnostic parallel universe to escape into.

²¹ “Creation tells of God’s glory precisely because it is needless, and expression of love always directed toward another.” Hart, p. 251. Again, ““Creation thus is without foundations; it attends God, possessing no essence apart from its character as a free and open utterance within the infinity of his self-utterance.”

representation of his being.”²² And precisely the perfect beauty of Christ is expressed in his historical particularity; it is *this Jewish peasant*, born in *this dirty stable* who died *this torturous death* that reveals God’s most resplendent glory.²³ It is *this* historical world that God loves so much that God gave to in sending Christ.²⁴

A second implication of this then is that the senses—sight, touch, sound, smell, hearing—cannot of themselves take us away from God.²⁵ Which is why Genesis 2, focussing as it does on the creation of man and woman, reaches its crescendo in the “two shall become one flesh.”²⁶ *Eros* and *agape*, sensual love and commitment, belong equally together in God’s story. There is no diminishing of the glory of physicality and sensuality, sexuality; no priority of spirit over flesh. Both can lead astray when not directed to God’s glory, but they are both equal.²⁷

Genesis 1 is a fundamental and powerful antidote to any version of Christianity that sees art, in all its manifold senses, as a sideshow (or add-on or distraction) to the supposed main game of saving souls and preparing ourselves for bliss on the far side. Rather, artistic delight in the particular beauty of others and nature *is* the basis for Christian life and love.²⁸ All are called to the artistic life, whether it is washing windows or writing a masterpiece.²⁹ The artistic life is not a holiday house we retreat to occasionally from work-driven lives; instead, the artistic life is the whole of life lived in step with the rhythm of God’s joy, even in those times when sin’s discordant sounds drown God’s song out.

Sin is present “whenever we deny the artist in ourselves, [and] a kind of silent mourning goes on under the surface of our busy lives.”³⁰ But sin does not negate the aesthetic imperative, it intensifies it, prompting God’s people³¹ to the evermore urgent task of expressing the endless grace-filled song of creation in countless beautifying ways.

Thus we come to understand that to do all to the glory of God means to do all in accord with God’s goodness, God’s truth, God’s artistry. Artists and poets and

²² Hebrews 1:3

²³ Hart writes, “...a concrete and particular beauty is [Christianity’s] deepest truth.”

²⁴ John 3:16.

²⁵ Things in themselves have no pure essence that can be abstracted away from their embodied nature.

²⁶ Genesis 2:24

²⁷ As some say, “Matter matters.”

²⁸ Christians too often see no lasting value in art precisely because they inhabit a story, a false Gnostic story, where creation is about to *revert* to its chaotic foundations. Instead, Genesis 1 establishes a Christian aesthetic at its core.

²⁹ “Life is denied by lack of attention, whether it be to cleaning windows or trying to write a masterpiece”, Nadia Boulanger, A French composer (1887-1979). Boulanger was the first woman to conduct several major symphony orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and in England the Hallé Orchestra of Manchester and the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

³⁰ Schneider, *Writing alone and with others*.

³¹ As Christ’s *body*.

musicians have a special calling to the arts, but they act as reminders to *all* of us of our core artistic vocation.³²

The Allure of the Originating Narrative

Genesis 1 has no principles to apply to our lives.

There is no timeless truth to be wrenched from the text and bantered around like a theological trophy.

There is no philosophical pot of gold here to be pilfered from a well-meaning but ultimately benign poet.³³

The poetic story of Genesis 1 *is* life-changing *and* timeless *and* profoundly philosophical, but only *as poetic story*.³⁴ Genesis 1, itself an artistic creation, works by ever retelling its God-drenched story anew to anyone willing to listen.³⁵

Genesis 1 is not a story we conquer with rationality; it is a story to enter, a symphony to be heard, a theatre to participate in.

Genesis 1 is not a story we stumble into by accident, but a story we awaken into from God's deep rest, unprepared for the extravagance of the lavish banquet set before us.

Thus in the truest sense, Genesis 1 is a love story, the story of God's love.

But it is an understated love, a shy love, a love not broadcast in advance, not tuned into by wireless networks but soaked up by subterranean roots, a love disclosed along the way, a love only known when encountered.

The love of a firm hand on the shoulder.

The love that every morning looks expectantly upon the world and still sees the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Amen.

³² There is thus no hierarchy of vocations in Christian theology, with priests (or bishops!) and evangelists and missionaries at the top and the rest of us doing less important work for the kingdom.

³³ That would be as sacrilegious as chemically dissolving the Mona Lisa into its component colours to determine its true meaning.

³⁴ One must always be wary of Christian essentialism, a boiling down of storied truth to timeless propositions and abstract principles, to be then (ironically!) applied to you individual life. This false exegetical movement from (scriptural) narrative to abstraction to (personal) narrative is yet another form of world-denying Gnosticism. As Helen Andersson properly observes, "The work of abstraction is born of the repudiation of the pleasure of narration." (Andersson, "*The moment of a star: The ethics of narration*," 2001, *Studia Theologica*, p. 44. As I say to my students, when they see the film *Pride and Prejudice*, do they ask how to apply it to their lives? I certainly hope not.

³⁵ In this way, the particularity of this sacred text holds fast against the denial of particularity infecting contemporary Christianity, and contemporary culture.