

OUT OF CONTEXT - LITERARY CONTEXT  
A SERMON BASED ON GENESIS 1:1 – 2:3  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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SUNDAY, JUNE 30, 2019  
10:00 a.m.

Where do you begin?

Genesis chapter 1.

It is an intimidating text.

There's a whole ocean of Bible ahead of you.

What do you say when you are getting ready to leave shore?

What do you say to even begin addressing

God, the Bible and everything?

Where do you begin?

My wife Wendy has a version of this question,

that is an absolute favourite question of hers.

If you are part of a couple,

after she learns your names,

it is almost certain she will ask,

'How did you meet?'

When she does this,  
I almost always have flashes to Rob Reiner's movie,  
'When Harry Met Sally',  
because as happens in that movie,  
Wendy and I will get to hear a couple,  
tell together,  
how they met,  
and what lead to their getting married.

Because I tend toward shy myself,  
the thought of putting someone on the spot like that,  
usually makes me more than a little uncomfortable.  
I can be guilty of trying to shssh Wendy.  
But more often than not,  
we get to hear a pretty neat story,  
and seeing a couple remember  
where they began,  
it's actually quite a privilege.

Now,  
I've been known to have a few things to say at a wedding myself.

Usually before the reception begins, at the ceremony.

At a wedding, I have been called to speak words that change the world,  
for a couple, for their families, for the future.

For in a wedding ceremony,

after the Scriptures,

after the message,

after the vows,

and after the rings,

I speak words that change a person's status.

You have pledged yourselves to one another

in the bond of Christian marriage,

you have made your promises before God and these people

you have symbolized your covenant

by joining hands

and by giving and receiving the rings.

Then I speak and change their world.

I speak and I say,

Therefore I declare you to be husband and wife,  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And in that moment a man also becomes a husband,  
a woman also becomes a wife,  
the two become one,  
individuals become a couple,  
in-laws are created,  
families become joined,  
and while they may sit on other sides of the aisle  
if the couple chooses to have children,  
parents of the bride and parents of the groom  
will share grandchildren,  
brothers and sisters of the bride  
brothers and sisters of the groom  
will share being uncles and aunts,  
and everything is new.

Where do you begin?

With a couple, is it in the story of how they met?

Or is it in the officiant's words,  
declaring them husband and wife?

We count the anniversaries from the minister's words.

But we tell our kids about how we met.

Where do you begin?

And Genesis?

Where do you begin to talk about a relationship with God?

How can you even begin to describe the beginning?

The post-enlightenment or modern, rational mind

would like to simply explain it.

We live in a time that wants to just say how it came to be.

We want reasonable explanations,

reasonably explained.

Did the universe begin with a big bang?

Does evolutionary theory have a leg to stand on?

Or is it just a fish out of water?

God being God,

could create in six twenty four hour periods

if God wanted.

Do you think that's how it went down?

Because there are dinosaur bones,

and the continents do really look like they drifted,

and its in this last century we have come to realize

they are still moving.

And why does only Australia get kangaroos and koala's

while we get skunks

and every year it's a new and different flu shot,

because the viruses keep changing.

If I think that yeah,

I can see that maybe there is clearly something to all that,

does that mean because it's not in Genesis,

that I've disqualified myself from the life of faith?

A beginning has so many questions, it can feel like there is no answer.

It can feel chaotic.

It can feel formless and empty, unilluminated – dark and deep.

Where do you begin?

Where do you begin when there's unknown?

When there's chaos?

Where do you begin when you don't know what's what?

If you've ever held a little one,

when they have lost themselves,

when they are upset, or frightened, or hurt, or just plain ol' tired,

you may have found yourself asking,

yikes, where do I even begin to address this?

Where do I begin?

You can rationally explain how she hurt herself all you want,

that you had told her not to run on the slippery floor.

It probably won't help.

You can tell him why he shouldn't be upset,

that the friend can and will come to play again.

It probably won't help.

You can tell them they should have had a nap,

or that tomorrow will be better -

or - you could maybe hold them,

and sing.

When I worked at summer camp,

and you had to bring order to the chaos

that was hundreds of kids, talking, shouting, laughing,

just generally goofing around,

when you looked out on the sea of people

you could only ask,

where do I begin in this chaos?

You could scream, jump up and down, wave your arms,

flick the lights even,

generally, none of it worked.



Or you could start singing one of the favourite camp songs.

And watch and listen, as one by one,

like iron filings to a magnet,

beauty and order came to be.

It was good.

If you've ever sat at the bedside of a loved one

who was near the end,

and treatments were exhausted,

and you didn't know which way was up,

you may have not known where to begin.

You may have tried to understand it all.

You may have had a medical professional come in,

and give you an explanation

of what was happening.

You may have tried to reason.

Or, if you weren't overly self-conscious,

You may have sung a song, or two.

Or played one on the CD player,

or just hummed.

A hymn, a love song, a favourite from childhood.

Where do you begin?

You begin with a song.

The Magician's Nephew is the book by C.S. Lewis,

that comes before The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe.

It is the book that tells the story of the beginning

of the land of Narnia,

Narnia before the Pevensie children ever get there,

before they get through

the wardrobe at their uncle's estate,

Narnia before the lamppost.

Having arrived from the in between place,

to a place of total darkness,

the characters notice something is beginning.

Lewis tells the story,

“A voice had begun to sing.

It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide  
from what direction it was coming.

Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once.

Sometimes he almost thought

it was coming out of the earth beneath them.

Its lower notes were deep enough  
to be the voice of the earth herself.

There were no words.

There was hardly even a tune.

But it was, beyond comparison,  
the most beautiful noise he had ever heard.

It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it.

Then two wonders happened at the same moment.

One was that the voice was suddenly joined by other voices;  
more voices than you could possibly count.

They were in harmony with it,

but far higher up the scale: cold, tingling, silvery voices.

The second wonder was that the blackness overhead,

all at once was blazing with stars.

They didn't come out gently one by one,

as they do on a summer evening.

If you had seen it and heard it ,

you would have felt quite certain

that it was the stars themselves which were singing,

and that it was the First Voice,

the deep one,

which had made them appear and made them sing.”

Where do you begin?

Where does the Bible begin?

It begins with The First Voice which had begun to sing.

We have talked about the Bible in today's context.

We have talked about reading it with an understanding of cultural context,

and historical context.

Today I want to make you aware of the Bible's literary context.

For the Bible is not a newspaper.

Although there are some parts that read like reporting.

The Bible is not a novel.

Although there are some parts that read like story.

The Bible is not a science paper.

Although there is truth to be discovered in it.

When reading the Bible, it is important to understand

what kind of literature within it you are reading.

Because it changes how you approach the text.

Do you remember those Reader's Digest condensed books

that our parents and grandparents would get?

Remember how sometimes they would put four condensed

books into one cover?

The Bible is like that, a compilation.

It has 66 books in it.

Some are historical in nature.

Some are letters to churches or individuals

Some are accounts of the life of Jesus.

Some are poetry.

Some are words of the prophets.

Some books have all of those components within them.

The reason I wanted to bring you to Genesis 1,  
is it a clearer example of what can happen  
when you misunderstand the type of literature it is.

Take a moment this week

and go back to Genesis chapter one.

When you sit down, bring five different coloured pens  
or pencil crayons or high lighters with you.

With one colour,

underline every place you read in the passage,

“and God said”.

With the next colour underline the words

“let there be” or “let the”

Then, with the third colour, underline

“and it was so”

Take the fourth colour and underline

“And God saw that it was good.”

Finally, with your fifth colour underline,

“And there was evening, and there was morning”

What you will then be able to see,

is what you felt when you heard the text read,

a rhythm, a pulse, a poem.

Where do you begin?

You begin with a song.

The closest relation to this passage in Genesis,

is not a scientific paper on the origins of the universe,

is not a theological dissertation on beginning of creation,

it is not a comparison to other culture’s origin stories

the closest relation to this passage,

are the Psalms, songs.

And God said,

Let there be.

And it was so,

And God saw that it was good.

There was evening and there was morning.

And God said,

Let there be.

And it was so,

And God saw that it was good.

There was evening and there was morning.

It is the refrain we come back to again and again.

And God said,

Let there be.

And it was so,

And God saw that it was good.

There was evening and there was morning.

It is the chorus of the song.

Where do you begin?



You begin with God's song.

My O.T. professor used to make the case that God doesn't sing.

He used to say, God's creation sings to God, not the other way around.

He used to make that case until one of his students found God,  
in a part of the Bible no one typically goes to, Zephaniah.

There, In a tiny verse, in a tiny book,

God quietly sits, holds us and sings his comfort.

"The Lord your God is with you.

He is mighty to save.

He will take great delight in you.

He will quiet you with his love.

He will rejoice over you with singing."

The Spirit of God hovers over the waters.

The wind, the breath, the voice of God

breezes through the chaos,

and speaks, and sings,

and sings, "Good things, good things."

There is another significant time at a wedding.

Beyond the minister's words of declaration.

Beyond the minister's wife question of how did you meet.

It is the first dance, the first song.

I still know the words to our first song.

It is not a marriage contract.

It is not a declaration in front of a minister in a church.

Not a dissertation, not a rational argument, or even a letter.

It is a song, a poem, a heart.

Where do you begin?

And God said,

Let there be.

And it was so,

And God saw that it was good.

There was evening and there was morning.

People will ask me.

What about the God of the Old Testament?

He doesn't seem all that nice.

Well, where do you begin to answer that?

You begin

with the song.

God said, let there be, and it was so.

And God saw that it was good.

He made humankind, and blessed them,

and gave them everything,

And God saw all that he had made,

and it was very good.

And you?

Where do you begin?

You don't begin when you finally get it right.

Whatever that is you are working on.

You don't begin when you forget your past.

Or when you achieve the perfect ideal you have created in your mind.

Or when you have amassed it all.

Or when you decide you've done okay.

In the beginning was the Word.

You begin,

when out from the chaos

you hear God singing you into being,

and like an iron filing on the magnet,

you line in to the beauty and order and welcome of God's voice.

You begin when from the darkness and chaos

of anxiety and guilt and confusion

you hear and breathe in

God's breath of life calling you blessed.

You begin when God looks at you

sees what he has made,

and says out loud to the universe "very good."

You begin with God's song.

That's where Genesis begins,

That's where you begin.

Amen.