

Reading our Story with Ancient Eyes

(Genesis 1) by Terri Lynn Friesen

Before I get to the sermon I just wanted to give some context to where we are going over the next few weeks. Patty talked about this a bit last Sunday, but since some of us were still away on holidays, I'll mention again that this Old Testament series was borne out of us spending time with the Osler School grade 6 class this fall. As we strived to try to understand and present the Old Testament through the eyes and mind of a grade 6 student, we saw patterns in the themes we hoped to emphasize. We saw that Israel used song, story, symbol and festival to re-tell and pass on to the next generation how God had taken care of them in the past.

That made us think about how we do this in our own congregation:

- there are a lot of things that we 'just do' at church that we've inherited from faithful people in this community - and the greater Mennonite community - before us - but are we telling the story in a way that compels us? And in a way that compels the next generation to consider this part of their story - not just their grandparents' story - but their story, in a world that is changing at a rapid pace - especially in regards to media, and how stories are told.

And so we bring the study of the Old Testament to all of us, to remind us of the stories that frame the history of the people of God. And we'll start with the beginning of the beginning - the first part of the Creation account in Genesis One. When I was studying theology at Regent College, I took a class called 'Living in Creation' where one of the books we had to read was called 'The Lost World of

Genesis One', by John Walton. I didn't love the class because it involved far more 'sitting in a library' than 'living in creation'. But, the book was helpful for a primer for what I'll talk about today, and that is: **How we read scripture in general, how that applies to the creation story in Genesis 1, and what that means for our relationship with the world.** I used Walton's book as well as other voices to guide my thoughts for this morning.

So to begin with: how do we approach reading scripture, in general? John Walton begins his book this way:

"We like to think of the Bible possessively - my Bible, a rare heritage, a holy treasure, a spiritual heirloom. And well we should. The Bible is fresh and speaks to each of us as God's revelation of himself in a confusing world. It is ours and at times feels quite personal.

But we cannot afford to let this idea run away with us. The Old Testament does communicate to us and it was written for us, and for all humankind. But it was not written to us. It was written to Israel. It is God's revelation of himself to Israel and secondarily through Israel to everyone else." (pg. 9)

And so, if when we read scripture, we need to be aware of these distinctions. Genesis is rightly understood as a description of the beginning of the story of relationship between God and Creation. The problems with interpretation begin to happen when we take the language and culture of Genesis and try to understand it through our own language and cultural framework.

It is good to be reminded, as Walton says, that:

“Language assumes a culture, operates in a culture, serves a culture, and is designed to communicate into a framework of a culture. Consequently, when we read a text written in another language and addressed to another culture, we must translate the culture as well as the language if we hope to understand the text fully.” (pg. 9)

Walton goes on to say that translating is tricky work. Anyone who speaks another language here understands that there are some *words* in any language that just don't translate well - I hear people flip back and forth between English and Low German when they can find another word that fits better...there are endless examples in the Bible, but the Hebrew word ***Hesed*** is a good one. The NASB translation uses 'lovingkindness' to express this, other translators use loyalty, love, kindness, and others. But the meaning of the word can't really be fully expressed in English, and so ANY word that we try to use inevitably distorts the meaning the Hebrew authors were after.

The same goes with translating culture. There are various examples: but a fun one is beauty. What is deemed beautiful changes between cultures and over time. Song of Songs is a favourite example from the Bible that we love to make fun of. Ask our young people when the last time they liked somebody and sent them a text that says,

How beautiful you are, my love,
how very beautiful!

Your eyes are doves
behind your veil.

Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead.

²Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes
that have come up from the washing,

That's the first part of chapter 4 of Song of Songs, and if Thomas ever told me my hair looked like a flock of goats, I'd probably be insulted, or at least just laugh. What cultures define as beautiful changes over time – we see this all the time in fashion – we shouldn't be surprised to see it in the Bible.

So, John Walton says that rather than translating the culture, we need to attempt to enter into the culture. He goes further to say that *literature* is an important piece of culture, and prominent texts help us understand cultures of the past. This means looking to texts besides just the Bible to understand ancient cultures, and allow us to read with ancient eyes.

The neighbouring cultures to the Hebrew people – geographically and over time – had their own traditional creation stories and other writings. The *Enuma Elish* of the Babylonians is perhaps the most well-known. Sumarians, Egyptians, and Canaanites also had creation stories. We can expect that Israel's story of their origin and their relationship with creation might have similar elements to these. This isn't necessarily because the Israelites were copying their neighbours' stories and changing them a bit to make it their own. It was because all the people at the time had fairly similar understandings of the world - in that they were all trying to

answer similar questions about their existence. They were breathing the same philosophical air.

(2) So what does that mean for our reading of Genesis One:

We could spend a lot of time unpacking what has been learned about other near eastern cultures, but if you'll allow me to summarize, ancient near eastern folks thought about the creation of their world in terms of order and function. The Hebrew people, not unlike Ancient Egypt, Babylon, and the other cultures of the time were thinking in terms of how order came out of the formlessness, the emptiness, the deep (Gen 1:1). The world's pre-creation state is absent of function - nothing had been separated, distinguished, named. It wasn't necessarily absent of material; they weren't really concerned about those details. The creative act was *bringing functionality to the world*: separating, naming and giving roles.

So we need to stop here and notice that this doesn't really describe the cosmos in modern terms (ways that we might use to describe the world), and it doesn't attempt to answer modern questions (questions WE might have about the origins of creation).

No one in the ancient world cared about physics and microbiology the way that we understand it today! That is not the framework that they used to describe things. To ancient Hebrew folks, there was no distinction between natural and supernatural. Elohim was in the world – working away. And though that work could have involved ions and nuclei and things we now explain using scientific

terms, to ancient Hebrew people “...the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” was also completely accurate.

Ancient near eastern folks were also concerned about authority, jurisdictions, and who is in charge of what. You can certainly pick this up from the Enuma Elish. (And this is paraphrased a bit, so I invite you to do your own research): The epic begins with water and swirling chaos, out of which the god Apsu and goddess Tia-mat are created. They give birth to younger gods, who cause trouble, and make noise, and no one can sleep. This angers Apsu and Tia-mat, and a lot of violence and death follow until a god named Marduk wins the whole battle, and assigns all of the gods to their stations. The Enuma Elish is long, so this leaves out a few details, but demonstrates the themes of authority and who was in charge of whom and of what.

Ancient Hebrew folks were thinking about these same things. The scripture read earlier focused on that last ‘creative act’ of Elohim – making humanity in the image of God. We think of this passage to help inform how we understand the goodness and value of all that it is to be human. It also helps us understand God – to understand ourselves as created in God’s image. But for the ancient Hebrew people – the idea of the image of a god had different connotations. In the cultures that surrounded them, the image of a god was placed in a temple. It signified that a god had made its home there. So the act of Elohim creating humanity last, and creating humanity in the image of God, and then resting – in the ancient near east – this was plain speak for the Hebrew God making God’s home in creation; for declaring authority over the earth. The Earth – not some construction of human hands – was the temple – the dwelling place – of the Hebrew God. This was not a

God that was distant, violent, or volatile – like the gods of the Babylonians. This was a God whose Spirit continued to be present, who thought all of what had been created was good – not just humanity – but all of creation.

So that's a lot of background to Genesis one, but that's the point of today. Ultimately, exploring these ideas is not meant to be an intellectual exercise. It's not pie-in-the-sky theology - all theology should affect how we live at some point. So how does the way we read this biblical creation narrative affect our identity as the people of God?

For one, I think this changes the trajectory of the questions we ask of Genesis one – which makes null the particular argument that science and faith are incongruent with each other. Genesis one isn't trying to answer scientific questions. It's answering questions about order and function and authority.

I think this story strengthens our understanding of our calling as people of God to care for creation. This is something, that in my experience, Anabaptists get. And for myself, at least, this call resonated with me so deeply that it drew me to Anabaptism out of other churches that I was otherwise pretty much happy with. Anabaptists do creation care – but in our doing, I think it's always important to be drawn back to the reason why we do – because our God has made God's home here - has brought creation into being, called it good, and taken up God's dwelling place here.

Finally, I think this story reminds us that we don't worship a God who is 'out there'. We worship a God who is as close as air and breath. A God who has called us into being. A God who journeys with us throughout history, from the very beginning.

Further Reading:

Five Hot Tips for Reading the Bible (and Other Bad Blog Post Titles) by Jane Halton

<http://yalt.crcna.org/five-hot-tips-on-reading-the-bible-and-other-bad-blog-post-titles/#.WFgcExsrLIU>

Biologos

<http://biologos.org/blogs/archive/genesis-1-and-a-babylonian-creation-story>