

equally valid lenses: like the difference between viewing Van Gogh's painting "Starry Night" and looking at a picture of deep space from the Hubble Space Telescope. They are both true in the sense that they describe an actual thing – the night sky – but their function is very different: Van Gogh's painting evokes a feeling; the Hubble photos impart empirical data. In other words, there may be more than one way to tell the same story.

The writers of Genesis lived in a world where people arranged their lives around a particular story, set in a particular time and place. It is not pure history or science, nor is it pure myth and fiction. It is the story they found themselves in; a story with two central characters: God and humanity. It's a story that's less about "cosmic inflation" and more about "cosmic elation": the joy of a creating God, a God who creates all things "good."

Functional creation. So, what does it mean that God "created"? Walton argues that Genesis 1 is not describing the *material* origins of the universe, but rather the *functional* origins of the world. Genesis is less about how God made the world than about how God made it to function. When it is functioning well, it is "good" and God delights in it: cosmic elation!

Look at how our text begins: *In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters* (vv. 1-2). We typically read this passage and conclude that God created the world out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), which would be correct if this text only concerned the material origins of the universe: *how* God made the universe. But what if we read the text and asked, "*Why* did God make the universe?" Now we find that God is, in fact, starting creation with some raw materials: a formless void, darkness and "the deep."

We easily miss what our spiritual ancestors would have quickly understood here. The Hebrew word for "formless" (*tohu*) means to lack worth or purpose, and the darkness and the deep are indicators of chaos and disorder. And what is God's response to this worthless chaos and disorder? God "creates." God gives both worth and purpose, and God brings order to the chaos. The Hebrew word for "create" (*bara*) is used over 50 times in Genesis, and almost always as the direct object of the verb, indicating that something being created for a specific role or function. God doesn't randomly create; *God creates for a specific purpose*.

Purposeful creation. We see this purpose in Genesis 1. On the first day, God creates "light" and calls it "day," creating the function of *time*. On day two, God "separates" the water from

the land, creating the function of *weather*. On day three God creates vegetation in order to *provide food*. God creates time, weather and food: all things needed for human existence. On days four and five, God installs functionaries: the sun and moon and the animals that are to be fruitful and multiply. And then, on day six, comes the creation of humankind, whose function is to care for the creation, have "dominion" over it and reflect the image of God within it (1:26-27). Everything is created for a purpose. At the end of the sixth day, God looks at it all and calls it "very good." Everything is functioning, just as God intended.

The interpretive key. Then comes a curious description of the seventh day: *God finished the work that [God] had done, and [God] rested on the seventh day from all the work [God] had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work [God] had done in creation* (2:2-3). God rests, evoking the image of a weary God, kicking up God's feet, and sitting back with a tall glass of lemonade. But if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present, why would God need to rest? This description of the seventh day is the key to understanding all of Genesis 1 and, indeed, the whole biblical narrative.

The creation story in Genesis is a temple-building story. The ancient peoples created temples in which their gods "rested," places where the gods "dwelt" and "lived," places for the gods to "reside" and "inhabit." Temples were not nap spaces for the gods; they were the places from which the gods controlled the cosmos. When a god rests, it means that there is security and stability within an ordered system because that god is in control. This is not rest in the sense of relaxation, but rest in the sense of engagement, rule and order.

The Genesis narrative differs from the other cultures, because here there is One, Almighty, Creating God who "rests" on the seventh day of creation. God creates the cosmos and sets things in their proper order and function. Creation is now prepared and ready as a temple in which God will dwell with God's people. The seventh day, in other words, is a true "God" moment, the moment when God moves into creation, the moment God comes to live with us! For six days God builds the house; on the seventh day that house becomes God's home.

This Creator-God delights in creation enough to want to be fully present. This Creator-God is pleased with the results – God is elated - and finds the creative outcome so congenial that God "rests," moves in, settles down, and takes up residence in creation. The point of the creation story is God at rest, dwelling with God's people and in which God delights.

God loves us still. Of course, since those first days of creation, things have gone horribly wrong. God is often disappointed with the choices we make and the inadequate care we

provide for God’s creation. But even after we messed things up, God did not abandon us. God walked with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God continued to dwell with Israel in tabernacle and temple. Then, in the most stunning evidence of cosmic elation, God became the "Word made flesh" that dwelt among us in Jesus Christ, and still that promise remains for the future. At the end of the Bible, just like at the beginning, the promise is that God will dwell with God’s people again (Rev. 21:1-3).

So, to my mind, the creation story is not really about the *How* of things, but about the *Who* and the *Why*. God is revealed as One who creates for the purpose of being in relationship. The very essence of our God is *communal*. Witness the three Persons of the Trinity: it's natural that this unity in community would seek to bring others into relationship as well. God made the whole universe and dwells within it with the cosmic elation of love.

When we understand creation in this way, we better understand our place within it: not merely as the product of cosmic dust and eons of evolution, but as the beloved people of God who created us in God’s image. The earth is not merely a happy accident; it is God's dwelling place, God’s home. We are the priests in God's temple and our vocation is to care for creation in God's name. We're people about whom God cared enough to send Jesus to redeem us from our sin and brokenness, and to restore creation to its proper function.

Sabbath reminds us of this reality. On the Sabbath, we gather to stop our daily routine, to cease our attempts at controlling the world around us, and to simply worship the God who creates. We enjoy God's dwelling with us. We gather at the table with Christ, God with us. We are reminded again, as the prophet Habakkuk reminded Israel, that *God is in [God's] holy temple; let all earth keep silence before [God]* (2:20). We gather to hear the promise of Scripture: that God will be with us forever. Where creation has been, gives way to where it is headed: to the glory of God who makes all things new. Let creation rejoice!

Prayer: Almighty God, Your Spirit swept over the waters of creation; You sweep over us now, creating something new. Call us away from the distractions of the world to experience what You are doing in us and through us, and in Your creation. Open us to a new awakening, a new beginning, where we look through the lens of the goodness of Your creation, experiencing all possibilities in You. In the name of Jesus, who leads us into life, and in the power of the Spirit who creates, we pray. Amen.

Sources:

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Cosmic Elation

Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2017 **Genesis 1:1-2:4a**
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

On October 31, 1992, Pope John Paul II, addressing the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, declared that Galileo Galilei was right after all, and the Vatican was wrong: the earth does, in fact, move around the sun. Not that many doubted it, not in the 20th century, anyway; but the Pope’s message did close the book on a case that lasted more than 350 years.

Peering through his telescope, Galileo observed mountains on the moon, the planet Jupiter and its moons, and the planet Venus as it went through phases, just as Earth's moon waxes and wanes. With this last discovery, Galileo proved what Polish astronomer Copernicus believed: the earth moves around the sun. Excited, Galileo published his findings.

Which is when Galileo ran afoul of the church. The Cardinals warned him to stop teaching and forbidding him to publish another word on any topic. They hauled him before a tribunal to explain for his ideas. They placed Galileo under house arrest. Under such pressure, Galileo recanted the scientific conclusion he knew to be true, professing before the Cardinals that the earth does not move around the sun, although legend states that, after recanting, Galileo softly whispered, “and yet it moves.”

This case, and many that followed, lit the firestorm between reason and belief, evidence and faith, scientists and theologians. The Age of Enlightenment proposed ideas that separated empirical science from Biblical faith, and divided the Creator from the created. That divide remains to this day. Consider the creation story from Genesis. We want to know: did God really create the world in six days? If so, how did God do it? Which came first: the chicken or the egg? And what proof do we have that God even exists?

Some *Christians* are afraid that if creation didn't happen exactly how and when the Bible says, then perhaps the rest of the Bible isn’t true either. Some *scientists* struggle to hold their faith in tension with the evidence of cosmic observation, fossils and geologic time. But is this debate between science and faith necessary? Is there a way to understand the creation story in Genesis as authoritative, while making room for the discoveries like those of science?

Old Testament scholar and Wheaton College professor John Walton thinks so. In his intriguing books *The Lost World of Genesis One* and *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, Walton suggests that science and Scriptures observe the same universe through two different, but