

I

Beginning today, and leading up to Christmas, we're going to be reading and preaching our way through some of the major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, also commonly called the Old Testament. And we're starting this morning with the very first page of the biblical story.

Genesis literally means beginning, so I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Genesis, beginning at the first chapter at the first verse.

*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 face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

*And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.*

*And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into*

*one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.*

*And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.*

*And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God*

*saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.*

*And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.*

*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.*

*God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed*

*in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he 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.*

*These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.*

*This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.*

## II

There's something in all of us, I think, that is naturally intrigued by origin stories. There's something in us that wants to know the backstory, something in us that wants to know and understand how things came to be as they are.

And I think that's more than just intellectual curiosity. An origin story does more than communicate basic biographical or historical details. An origin story tells us something about

who we are and our place in the grand scheme of things.

We know that the way in which we tell the stories of our past, particularly about the very beginning, has the power to shape how we experience the present and how we think about the future.

For example, here in this country, we learn from a very early age that on July 4, 1776, our forebears signed a document that proclaimed, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men (sic) are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

For us, that origin story is more than a story about some people in a hot room having a debate about 18<sup>th</sup> century tax policy and political science. We continue to talk about that story and tell it to our children and grandchildren because that national origin story shapes how we understand the present, and how we think about the future.

Origin stories, by their very design, are not neutral things. Origin stories are always about more than biographical or historical details, nowhere is that more evident than what’s before us in our story for today in Genesis 1.

Most of us, I suspect, are very familiar with this origin story. We learn it from a very early age. In most of the world today, even the most secular person is at probably at least a little

familiar with the basic outline of this story from Genesis.

But at the time that this particular origin story was transferred from oral into written form, it was not the story being told about how all things came to be as they are.

Even though this is a story about the very beginning of all things, most bible scholars think that the story that has been preserved for to us in Genesis wasn’t transferred from oral to written form until very late in human history, as late as only about 2,600 years ago.

About 587 years before Jesus’ birth, our ancestors in faith in ancient Israel were conquered by their near Eastern neighbors, the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians invaded the Land of Promise, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and carted off scores of our ancestors in faith out of the land and made them to live as slaves in Babylon.

And while they were living as exiles and prisoners in Babylon, our ancestors became very familiar with Babylon’s version of the creation story, an epic called the Enuma Elish.

When asked the question about how all things came to be as they are, Babylon answered with this story, and it goes something like this.

Before there was an earth or humans, there were gods and goddesses. One god thought that others were being too noisy, and an argument broke out. The argument turned violent, gods and goddesses battled each other, and some

died in the battle. According to Babylon, the earth sprouted up on the corpse a dead goddess (and the source of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers are where her eyes used to be), and the first human was made from of the blood of a god who also died in that same cosmic battle.

That's the story that our Israelite ancestors came to learn in captivity in Babylon. The Babylonian story about how all things came to be, is one that is rooted in anger, violence, retribution, and bloodshed. And if you know anything about the Babylonian culture that came up learning that story, living that story, and teaching it to their children and grandchildren, you know that that culture was one of violence, retribution, and bloodshed.

But our Israelite ancestors living as exiles in Babylon knew there was a different origin story, one that their parents and grandparents had taught them for generations. The Genesis story says that God created all that is, seen an unseen, not out of anger or with an act of violence or atop a dead body, but out of sheer, sovereign love, and simply with a word. God said, "Let there be," and it was so.

The Genesis story says that human beings are not made in the image of God, not from spilled blood.

The Genesis story says that creation is not an accident, but a gift, and entrusted to humankind for our enjoyment and stewardship.

The Genesis story says that struggle and strife and work are not the only things there are in life, but there is time to rest, time to reflect, time to simply be.

And that's what makes the origin story preserved for in Genesis so compelling to me – because it's a counter testimony to every other story that says that life is meaningless. It's a counter testimony to every other story that says that the only things that matter are what you can see, hold, and buy. It's a counter testimony to every other story that says that might makes right and the only way to resolve conflict is through violence and bloodshed.

That's how the biblical story, begins, my friend. Creation with a word. Creation of humans in the very image of God. Humankind created for lifelong covenant relationship with God. That's our origin story.

### III

And I wonder about you, my friend. I wonder about your origin story. I wonder about the stories you were told about where you came from, and who you are, and what your purpose is in this life.

Maybe your origin story is an affirming one. I hope for most of you that that is indeed the case.

But I know that some of you have been told that your origin story is that you are just an accident of biology. You've been told that you're worthless, that you have nothing to contribute to

the grand scheme of things, and no one would notice if you just ceased to exist.

And if that's you, my friend, I hope you'll read this Genesis account as counter testimony to a toxic origin story.

Because here's the biblical truth. God made everything there is, seen and unseen. God made every galaxy, every star, every planet, every rock, hill, and tree. God made every living thing.

But out of all of the creation, out of all the things that have ever been, you are made in God's very own image. There never has been and never will be anyone just like you. You are irreplaceable, and when you look in the mirror, you are not just looking at your reflection. You are looking at the spitting image of your divine parent.

You are priceless to God, not because of what you can produce, not because of anything you've said or not said, not because of anything you've done or not done, but because in life and in death, you belong, body and soul, not to yourself but to your faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

That's the biblical truth about you, my friend. There's nowhere that God would not go, including through the very gates of hell itself, to be with you. There's nothing that God would not give to you, including God's only Son.

You are not worthless, my friend. In fact, you have a critical role to play in this story. You were created to be God's royal steward.

In the days when there were kings and castles, the royal steward was the most important person in the court, because the royal steward managed the king's estate. When the royal steward made a management decision, that decision carried the full force and effect of the king's decree, for the king trusted the royal steward explicitly. Good stewards were rewarded with more to manage on the king's behalf. Good stewards always understood themselves as just that – stewards. Good stewards never passed themselves off as the king.

You and I are not the owners of creation. We are its royal stewards who have been charged to manage it on God's behalf. It is not ours to do with as we please. It all belongs to God. All of it.

I told this story a few weeks ago, but it bears repeating. Some scientists discovered how to make life out of nothing but dirt. They were very excited about their discovery, and so they requested an audience before the throne of God to show off what they'd learned.

And so when they stood before God, they said, "God, we've mastered the power of creation. We can make life out of dirt." And God said, "Oh, that's very interesting. OK, let's see what you've got."

And so the scientists turned to each other and said, "OK, guys, just like we practiced." And one bent down to scoop up some dirt off the floor, and God said, "Whoa whoa whoa ... go make your own dirt."

## IV

So as we live out our discipleship together here at First Presbyterian Church, as we contemplate our past, examine our present, and dream about our future, may we never forget our beginnings. May we remember who and whose we are.

May we proclaim in word and indeed the Genesis story: God created all that is with a word, and God has called it good – and may we tell that story as counter testimony to any story that says that that claims that bloodshed and violence are just the nature of things.

May we proclaim in word and indeed the Genesis story: God has infused the very fabric of creation with abundance, and may we tell that story as counter testimony to any story that claims says that poverty is an unfortunate but unavoidable reality.

May we proclaim in word and indeed the Genesis story: when we look into the face of another human being, we are looking at the very image of God. And may we tell that story as counter testimony to any story that claims that some people were created to rule, and others were created to serve, and therefore some people's lives are more worthy than others.

May we live the Genesis story as counter testimony. May live as royal stewards of all that God has entrusted to us, in gratitude and joy, until Christ comes again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.