

CREATION AND THE GIFT OF TIME

by Eugene Peterson

The Holy Spirit has descended on this old world of ours. Psalm 29 asks us to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. We look around and there it is: a grace revealing gesture, fresh snowfall, a friend's forgiveness, the first migrating yellow warbler, a miracle conversion, a truth-telling poem, pasque-flower in bloom, the good death of a parent, resurrection, Father Son and Holy Spirit, all the endless permutations of life – the beauty of holiness – and we have ringside seats. O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. – Eugene Peterson, Seattle 2001

The two creation stories, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, set at the entrance to our Bibles, are primarily texts for living in the time and the place that we wake up to each morning.

Each has been studied meticulously by both Jewish and Christian scholars for a couple of thousand years, and their accumulated insights and truths stagger our imaginations. There is so much here to consider and ponder, to appreciate and respond to. What is sometimes missed in this cascade of exegetical brilliance, pouring out of the work of scholars of Genesis 1 and 2, is how skillfully and well these texts lead us ordinary working Christians into the land of the living.

It is easy to miss the personal immediacy of Genesis 1 and 2, as we are sometimes distracted by the polemical debates that involve the big cosmological questions about how things began, or are tempted to use the texts to pick fights with atheists. For a time I was caught up in both of these distractions but also intoxicated with the words, images and syntax, comparing and evaluating these creation stories and contrasting the worlds in ancient Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations.

The challenge in Genesis is to shift from understanding the text as the beginning of all things to listening to the text as a way to begin to live now. When I became a pastor, I gradually realized what powerful texts these are for dealing with life just as we live it day after day. As a pastor, the focus of my life has

been to pray and preach and teach the holy scriptures into the lives of everyday people: husbands and wives raising children, engineers building bridges, farmers in the wheat fields and arthritic 80-year-olds in nursing homes. In the course of doing that, I came to think of Genesis 1 and 2 as among the most uninterpreted and under-used texts for shaping an obedient and reverent life, following Jesus in our daily working and worshipping lives.

A PEOPLE IN EXILE

First, I was struck by how the cultural and spiritual conditions in which we are living matched the conditions of the Hebrew people of God in the sixth century BC, a century of exile. The pervasive uprootedness, loss of biblical tradition, lack of moral consensus and common memories, and living far removed from where we grew up, have left people with little place or grounding. These are exile conditions. That is when I discovered the exile texts of Isaiah, pastoral messages to people who have lost touch with their time and place in the world. One of the most important words used by the prophet Isaiah is 'create'. In the Bible it is used exclusively with God as the subject: men and women don't create- God does. When nothing we do makes any difference and we are left standing around clueless, then we are ready for God to create. When the conditions in which we live seem totally alien to life and salvation, we are reduced to waiting for what God can do. The verb 'to create' and the noun 'creator' appear more times in the exile preaching of Isaiah than in any other place in the Bible (17 times in Isaiah compared to six times in Genesis 1).

In Isaiah, the immediate, powerful, convincing and life-changing creation work of God is among people who feel uncreated, unformed, unfitted for the world in which they find themselves. Under Isaiah's prophetic influence, 'create' emerges from the background of Israel's history into an actively gospel word for what God is doing today around the exile people of today (Isaiah 61).

When we read Genesis from this shifted perspective,

we have to ask the question, how can I obey this and live within the gift of God's creation? Genesis 1 presents the gift of creation as the gift of time (Genesis 2 presents the gift of place). The understanding and honouring of time is fundamental to the realization of who we are and how we live. Violations of sacred time become desecrations of our most intimate relations with God and one another. Hours and days, weeks and months and years, these are the stuff of holiness.

Of the many desecrations visited on the creation, the profanation of time ranks near the top. Time is the medium in which we do all our living. When time is desecrated, life is desecrated. Evidence of this desecration is identified through hurry and procrastination. Both violate the sacredness of time. Hurry turns away from the gift of time in a compulsive grasping for abstractions that are not immediately there, but that it can possess and control. Procrastination is distracted from the gift of time in a lazy inattentiveness to the life of obedience and adoration by which we enter into what the apostle Paul called the fullness of time (Genesis 4:4). Genesis 1 is not in a hurry and does not procrastinate.

One of the greatest hindrances to our understanding of the creation gift of time has been a distracted focus and overemphasis on end-times, particularly for those caught up in waiting for the rapture. Ordinary time is not what biblical people endure or put up with until the end-time; it is a gift. End-time influences present time by charging it and filling it with purpose and significance. It is not a future we wait for, but the fullness of time flowing into the present that we receive and live in, in adoration and obedience.

In order to understand the creation gift of time, we must look at the structure of Genesis. The first creation account is arranged in a seven-day sequence. Six times the creation work is introduced with 'And God said'. Six times the segment is concluded with the phrase 'there was evening, and there was morning'. The seventh day is treated differently, which sets it apart for special emphasis and attention. For example, instead of the number being in the concluding phrase of the segment, it is introductory: 'on the seventh day' (2:2). The number seven is repeated twice more in successive sentences: 'By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing';

'so on the seventh day he rested from all his work'; 'And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done' (2:2-3).

The emphasis is quite different from the rhythm set up in the first six days. God's work of creation is conveyed to us rhythmically: one-two-three/four-five-six/seven-seven-seven (1-2-3/4-5-6/7-7-7). There are two sets of three days each of creation activity. In the first set of three (1-2-3), the pre-creation chaos mentioned in Genesis 1:2 is formed. In the second set of three (4-5-6), the pre-creation emptiness is filled. These two sets of creation work, forming and filling, are followed by seventh-day rest in triple emphasis. The third day of each three-day sequence is set apart by having two creation acts, setting up a cadence of one-two-three/three, one-two-three/three, seven/seven/seven. Genesis 1 is a skillfully and rhythmically arranged set of words.

In the past, the text would have been read aloud, enabling the listener to hear and enter into the rhythms of time, internalizing and assimilating the rhythms like a piece of music, 'keeping time'. Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke calls this the libretto for all of Israel's life. Think of Genesis 1 as an opera and oratorio, expressing the creation rhythms in our language and our work; we are created to live rhythmically.

The seven days of creation are repeated in a sequence of 28 days as the moon circles the earth, and this lunar rhythm is then repeated twelve times. These large rhythms bring us spring birth, summer growth, autumn harvest and winter sleep. Time is rhythmic; we are immersed in rhythms. Life is rhythmic. We ourselves are created rhythmically. We have a pulse that beats; our breath is rhythmic. Our bodies function in cycles of metabolic rhythms. You can speed up or slow down rhythm but you cannot eliminate it. We can disrupt the rhythms, but when we do, we are not living in the created way of our bodies.

The rhythms of time are resolved into the seventh pause – rest, a not doing. The structure of the segments is changed totally. The great Semitic scholar Umberto Cassuto pointed out that each of the sentences in the paragraph in which 'seven' is introduced (Genesis 2:2-3) has seven words, and the

seven-day paragraph has 35 words, a multiple of seven. Genesis 1 points to the seventh day as the clue to the meaning of creation. If we are going to live out the theology of creation, we must be personally involved with the seventh day, the Sabbath. Our involvement is made explicit in the Sinai command to keep the Sabbath holy. In the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath is the only creation action that gets attached to a commandment. This means that God's sabbatical rest is something in which we can participate. We can participate in God's creation work. Sabbath is our point of entry into creation.

The scholar Jon Levenson stresses that Genesis 1 accentuates the possibility of human access to the creation rhythms themselves. If Genesis 1 is the text for our understanding and participation in creation, then the Sabbath is the point of entry. The Sinai command is given in two forms, one in Exodus and the other in Deuteronomy. The commands are almost identical in the two listings except for the supporting reason, which is different. The Exodus text says:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work....**For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.** Exodus 20:8-11

The Deuteronomy text says:

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...**Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.** Deuteronomy 5:12-15

The Exodus command is endorsed by the precedence of God, who rested on the seventh day. When we remember the Sabbath and rest on it, we enter into and participate in and maintain the rhythm of creation, and keep time with God. The Deuteronomy command is endorsed by a sense of social justice. When we remember the Sabbath and rest on it, we

enter into and participate in the freedom of creation, the freedom to experience and share God's deliverance.

Keeping creation time preserves time as God's gift of holy rest; it erects a bastion in time against the commodification of time, reducing time to money or what we can get out of it, and having no time for beauty or anything that cannot be purchased or used. The Sabbath command is a defence against the hurry that desecrates time. It preserves and honours time as God's gift of holy freedom. It erects a weekly bastion against the lethargic procrastination that breeds oppression, that let's injustice flourish because we are not attending in obedience and adoration to people and animals and our environment.

CREATION CONTEMPLATION

The Genesis creation days are resolved in an act of rest. The word 'rest' expands and deepens for us if we use a more complex word: 'contemplation'. Contemplation is the practice of assimilating what is given to us and receiving it into our minds and spirits. There is nothing passive or withdrawn about contemplation. It is highly active, deeply energetic; it is neither hurried nor lazy. It requires being present to another, the Other, so that what we cannot do can be done to us through God's creation and the completion of his creation.

Worship is an extension of contemplation. How do we get in touch with God and live more or less in step with God? The obvious answer might be to watch the salmon run or to get a pair of binoculars and take up bird-watching, and become familiar with the colourful ways of hawks and warblers. Or we could get a fly-rod, learn to read the rivers, study which insects are fancied by the fish, and learn how to cast a line lightly on the waters that are home to brown trout. But the obvious answer is not the right answer. The best thing we can do is to enter a church and worship God. There is ancient and widespread evidence that connects world-making (that is, creation) with temple-building (that is, worship) or church-building (which serves worship). There is also evidence around the world that connects the ordering of worship and the creation of the world. The point of church-building is to realize and extend creation through human enact-

ment, through praise and prayer and by rehearsing and embracing the commandments, promises and blessings of God and putting them into action in the world that we live in. Architecturally, it is to give some symbolic hint and connection between what we are doing in the church and outside the church.

The way in which this Genesis text and the creation gift of time get inside us is through the act of worship. Worship is the primary means by which we become participants in God's work, but if we are not in touch with the way he works, things are diminished considerably. The Genesis work rhythms are brought into focus in the Sabbath rest commands and are reproduced in our lives in the act of worship in a way that enables us to participate. Then, when we walk out of the place of worship, we walk out with fresh recognizing eyes, with a recreated obedient heart into the world in which we are God's image, participating in God's work. Everything we see, feel, touch and taste carries within it the rhythms of 'and God said, "Let there be"...'and it was so'...'and it was good'. We are more deeply in and at home in the creation than ever. There is a story in Exodus that illustrates this clearly. In Exodus 31-40, Moses goes up on the mountain to receive the Commandments. The story begins and ends with God's command for the people of Israel to observe the Sabbath (Exodus 31:12-18; 35:1-3). The people of Israel are left waiting at the bottom of the mountain, and they get impatient because they don't know how to deal with time. They are in a hurry to get their hands on something, and so they make a golden calf and worship that. Moses brings down instructions for the tabernacle where they will worship; when he sees their idolatrous behaviour, he smashes the stone tablets in anger and then pleads with God to save the people of Israel.

The instructions for the building of the tabernacle (Exodus 26 – 40) provide a way to get the Genesis 1 creation rhythms into their lives. Bezalel and Oholiab are the master builders chosen by God to oversee the work and teach others the skills required to build the tabernacle. Bezalel is filled with the creation spirit (ruah Elohim), the same spirit that moved over the face of the waters in Genesis 1. In Exodus 40:33, we are told that Moses 'finished the work' – the same phrase used of God's creation work in Genesis 2:2. Is this a coincidence? We are meant to see that Genesis 1 and 2 and Exodus 26-40 are the working out of

creation and the way that we live.

The intimate connection between the world of creation and the world of worship is as significant today as it was when the tabernacle was first built in the wilderness. This connection between the world of creation and the world of worship is often ignored; for many, it is obscured beyond recognition. The connection is totally lost when Christian people focus entirely on the end-times and the rapture. I would desire this as a creation-denying escape from time. It describes a condition that relentlessly pervades and secularizes a culture that has no context in creation.

The conditions in which God began to create are described in Genesis 1 'without form and void... darkness was upon the face of the deep' (v. 2, RSV). It was a black soup of nothingness, formless and empty: chaos. These continue to be the conditions in which creation takes place. The condition of the world today is like this. As I stand in the congregation, I feel that I am in the presence of something very much like this. I also believe that over the black abyss of watery chaos, the Spirit of God is moving, and breathing over the chaos of our current culture. There is a hint of a picture in the Genesis phrase of the Spirit of God 'moving' or 'hovering': the same verb is used in Deuteronomy 32:11 of an eagle nurturing or hovering over its young and its nest. The most well-known use of a bird to picture the moving Spirit of God is in the Gospel story of Jesus' baptism, in which we see the Spirit of God descending like a dove, followed by a voice from heaven saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3:17, NRSV).

These first Genesis words are lapidary, stark and spare. Creation takes place at the conjunction of a vast watery chaos and the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is alive and present, descending upon and hovering over the chaos, and then the voice speaks: 'Let there be light', followed by seven more world-creating verbs.

Every time I step into a pulpit in a church, or stand behind a lectern in a lecture hall, or sit in someone's kitchen talking about their lives, I am living out the conditions of Genesis 1, confronted by the formlessness and the void in people's lives in community and culture, but believing in the present and moving Spirit of God. Then the great life-creating gospel verbs are

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said and sung, verbs given their fullest articulation in Jesus. It's not just what pastors do; all of us do this—or can do it. Physicians say that they feel the same thing in their surgeries, farmers as they work their fields, parents as they look after their children. I can't imagine any work or condition in which the Genesis 1 text is not timely for reviving the sacred rhythms in which we are privileged to participate each and every day.

One of the most fulfilling things about being a pastor is entering the mess of a person's life—hearing, listening to and embracing it—praying, staying there day after day, year after year, and, in the process, hearing God whisper endless variations on 'Let there be...' and experiencing the coming together of one more detail of the creation and aspect of salvation, '...and it was so'. If we are going to be involved in God's creation work, we cannot avoid the mess. IT cannot be denied, detoured, hurried through or procrastinated about. The mess—'without form and void'—is the biblical stuff of creation.

We must be present and enter the gift of rhythmic time in the midst of this mess, where the Spirit of God is moving and speaking creation and salvation into existence. When you write a poem, how many drafts do you throw away? When you paint a picture, how many tries before you get it right? When you get married, how many years does it take you before you develop the habits of the heart and emotional maturity adequate for love? If you have a child, how long does it take you to get used to the absolute otherness of this life? Every creative act begins in the mess. Creation cannot be imposed mechanically on the mess.

Creation brings life, love and maturity out of darkness. It is how creation began and how creation continues and goes on around us as God's Spirit moves over the mess. IT is both in us and all around us as God speaks heaven and earth into being. Everything we see and don't see is breathed into existence by God's word. There is so much around us to see, touch and taste; so much being desecrated,

polluted and exploited by harassed and hurried men and women. 11 September 2001 is a great reminder of the chaos.

When we are trained in holy adoration, practised in the rhythms of a holy creation, the Sabbath-shaped week prepares us to give witness in detail of what happens when God speaks, and then to invite others to participate in receiving and caring for the whole of creation right now.