

Creation and New Creation

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[0 : 00] Hello friends, my name is Erin and today we're going to read some creation stories.

A couple weeks ago, I went to see an exhibit designed by our very own Richard Bentham called Raven in the Box of Daylight, which is at the Museum of the American Indian. The exhibit walks you through a creation story in the tradition of the Klingit people who live along the west coast of what we may know as Canada and southern Alaska.

At the beginning of the Klingit creation story, humans live in a world that is completely dark. In this world, the sun, the moon, and stars are kept in locked boxes and hidden away in a secret place. The clever raven decides that he wants to steal the boxes, and through a series of tricks and transformations, he eventually breaks into the boxes that have the sun, moon, and stars, releasing them all into the sky. Suddenly, the world gets so bright that the people who have been living in darkness scatter to different places.

Some run to the sea and become today's sea creatures. Some run to the forest and become today's land animals. Some run to the sky and become birds. And a few stubborn souls stay in the bright light and become today's humans.

[1 : 16] When I learn about other people's creation stories, I think about how these stories are told, in this case through a really beautiful set of glasswork showing the raven, the different parts of the story, and all of the animals that the humans become at the end.

I also think about what these stories tell me about the people who wrote them, the importance of water to the Klingit people, how humans interact with animals. So as we read through our own shared Christian and Jewish creation stories today, I encourage you all to think about them through that lens, not is this account right or wrong, good or bad, but what do these stories tell us about ourselves, and what can we learn from them?

Usually we ask you all to take out your Bibles and follow along during the scripture reading, but because the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 are so familiar, I'm actually going to ask you to try and just listen, and pay attention to what you notice in these stories.

I'm using a translation that may be a little different from what you're used to. My hope is that this helps us all to see the stories in a new light. Genesis 1 When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep, and God's breath hovering over the waters, God said, Let there be light, and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness, and God called the light day and the darkness, God called night, and it was evening, and it was morning, the first day.

[2 : 48] And God said, Let there be a vault in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the water from the water. And God made the vault, and divided the water beneath the vault, from the water above the vault, and so it was.

And God called the vault heaven, and it was evening, and it was morning, the second day. And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered into one place, so the dry land will appear.

And so it was. And God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of waters, God called sea, and God saw that it was good. And God said, Let the earth grow plants, trees bearing fruit of each kind, and the hazard seed within it upon the earth.

And so it was. And the earth put forth grass, and plants yielding seed, and trees bearing fruit of each kind. And God saw that it was good. And it was evening, and it was morning, the third day.

And God said, Let there be lights in the vault of the heavens, to divide the day from the night, and they shall be signs for the fixed times, and for days and years, and they shall be lights in the vault of the heavens, to light up the earth.

[3 : 55] And so it was. And God made the two great lights, the great light for dominion of day, and the small light for dominion of night, and the stars. And God placed them in the vault of the heavens, to light up the earth, and to have dominion over day and night, and to divide the light from the darkness.

And God saw that it was good. And it was evening, and it was morning, fourth day. And God said, Let the water swarm with the swarm of living creatures, and let fowl fly over the earth, across the vault of the heavens.

And God created the great sea monsters, and every living creature that crawls, which the water had swarmed forth of each kind, and the winged fowl of each kind. And God saw that it was good.

And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let the fowl multiply in the earth. And it was evening, and it was morning, fifth day.

And God said, Let the earth bring forth living creatures of each kind, cattle and crawling things, and wild beasts of each kind. And so it was. And God made wild beasts of each kind, and cattle of every kind, and all crawling things on the ground of each kind.

[5 : 06] And God saw that it was good. And God said, Let us make a human in our image, by our likeness, to oversee the fish of the sea, and the fowl of the heavens, and the cattle, and the wild beasts, and all the crawling things that crawl upon the earth.

And God made the human in God's image. In the image of God, God created it. Male and female, God created them. And God blessed them, and said to them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and rule over it, and oversee the fish of the seas, and the fowl of the heavens, and all the beasts that crawl upon the earth.

And all of the earth, and every tree that has fruit bearing seed, yours, they will be for food. And all the earth, and to all of the fowl of the heavens, and to all the crawls on the earth, which has the breath of life within it, the green plants, are food.

And God saw all that God had done, and look, it was very good. And it was evening, and it was morning. Sixth day. Then the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their array.

And God completed on the seventh day, the task that God had done. And God ceased on the seventh day, from all the tasks that God had done. And God blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it. For on it, God had ceased from all God's tasks, that God had created to do.

[6 : 24] This is the tale of the heavens and the earth, when they were created. I know that was a little long, so now I'd like to pause, and ask you all to take 60 seconds, to talk with your neighbors.

What stood out to you? Was anything different, from how you remember this passage, or how you heard it read before? Did anything surprise you? was anything different from you?

We had a holy name, to wear anHAHA voumeas, because remember. And then we moved along. We can, called the north c'mon. Don't leave us regardless of the people. God is an. And good morning.

We're going to be at another age.■neville. We're going to eat hours. We're going to stay away in the Honda. And we don't need to eat seres in any place. We're going to be at another age. We were going to stay there. We're going to be at the middle, where he says we're going to get there, All right, you may be seated.

I use this translation because I think it really communicates one of the most important parts of this text, the poetry. You all probably noticed this in the repetition. God gives a command. The earth obeys.

[7 : 58] God sees that it is good. There is evening. There is morning. There's also some parallels between days one, two, and three, and then days four, five, and six, and even some rhyming.

There's a phrase in verse two that I read as, the earth then was welter and waste. The original Hebrew there is tohu wubohu. Tohu, emptiness, and wubohu, a word the ancient writers appear to have made up to rhyme with tohu, which they can do because this is poetry.

In verse 27, we read what some people refer to as the first poem of the Bible. So, God created the human, not the man, but the human, the Adam, in God's image.

In the image of God, God created it. Male and female, God created them. In the first creation story we get in the Bible, God first creates humanity and then gender. Which genders?

Only two are named, but as author and theologian Austin Harkey points out, the creation story we just read in Genesis 1 gives us a lot of categories. We read in this story that there is evening and morning every day, but we do not read that there is midday sun.

[9 : 07] In a summer like this one, we still believe that that exists. We read that God divides the sea from the dry land, but we have seen places called wetlands. We read that there are beasts and crawling things on the land and fish in the sea and birds in the sky, but we do not read that there are frogs and emus and starfish.

We assume that they still exist. We read that there are male and female. We know that intersex, non-binary, and two-spirit people are also created in the image of God.

So what does it mean to be created in the image of God? Richard Kelly talked on this last week, so today we're going to go a little deeper. However, what's important to understand here is that the ancient cultures surrounding the Israelites, people like the Egyptians, the Ammonites, the Babylonians, described their kings as being created in the image of their gods because their kings were ruling on behalf of their gods.

So in ancient times, the image of God is associated with ruling and with power. The king who bears the image of the gods says, we're going to fight the Moabites. All right, we're going to fight the Moabites.

The king says, build me a statue, a literal image of a god. All right, we're going to build you a statue that depicts you as a god. The king says, let there be a feast, and it is done.

[10 : 25] So what does it mean to be created in the image of the god of Genesis 1? Well, we know that this god also rules. God says, let there be light, and there is light.

God says, let the earth bring forth living creatures, and the earth obeys. Like the ancient kings, God speaks, and it is done. So the difference would be in how they use their power.

In Genesis 1, we see that this god uses God's ruling power to create light. So if we are made in the image of God, we are made powerful, and we are also made to create.

In this story, God does explicitly tell humans to rule, but it's not ruling as in taking over and destroying other places. In the same sentence, God says to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. So create and support life, and then to rule over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and every beast that crawls upon the earth. So ruling in the image of this god means tending to creation, and imitating God by looking at every part of creation and seeing that it is good.

[11 : 32] Ruling and planting and creating and honoring life are all deeply connected in this creation story. So when we say that we are created in the image of God, what that means is that we are called to rule in the way that God rules, by taking care of the world around us.

We learn one other thing about God in this first creation story. God rests. Of course, God rests on the seventh day, but God actually models rest for us even before that.

On the sixth day, God creates the human to take care of the world. On the seventh day, God rests, but on the sixth day, God delegates. So in this first creation story, what we learn is that we are created in the image of God, and that that means being creative, it means stewarding the world around us, and it also means resting.

It's time for the second creation story. This one is shorter, but I will warn you that it starts with one very long sentence. Genesis 2, verse 4. On the day, the Lord God made heaven and earth, no shrub of the field being yet on the earth, and no plant on the field yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not caused rain to fall on the earth, and there was also no human to till the soil, and wetness would well up from the earth to water all the surface of the soil.

Then the Lord God fashioned the human humus from the soil, and blew into its nostrils the breath of life, and God placed there the human that God had fashioned.

[13 : 04] And the Lord God caused to sprout from the soil every tree lovely to look at and good for food, and the tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now a river runs out of Eden to water the garden, and from there splits off into four streams.

We're going to skip ahead a bit. And the Lord God fashioned from the soil each beast of the field and each fowl of the heavens, and brought each to the human to see what he would call it. And whatever the human called a living creature, that was its name.

So wait a minute. In the second story, God makes the human first, and then the plants, and then the animals? We just heard the right order five minutes ago.

Plants, then animals, then humans. It's easy to see these kinds of discrepancies, and to take them to mean that the biblical authors can't be trusted. I'm also not the first person to point out that in the 21st century, we don't tend to think of the sky as being an enormous vault with lights in it, and that both of these creation stories have forgotten to mention the dinosaurs.

Again, I think that may be missing the point. We're not looking at security camera footage of the creation of the world. We are looking at a painting. Or rather, two different paintings done in two different styles.

[14 : 19] If we see the first creation story as a piece of art, it might be like this first example. This is The Redeemer by Hildegard von Mingen. It depicts the six days coming up out of a banner of darkness, and communicates to us that God created each of these parts, culminating in the human who is created in the image of God.

In this painting, she has included each of the details listed in the first story. The plants, the birds, the beasts. The first story took the structure of describing six different parts of creation.

But in the second, we learn about a garden, and it gives us a very different picture. This second painting is called The Garden of Eden by the American artist Erastus Salisbury Field. The images we get from these two stories are pretty different from one another.

But I like this one because it gives us a very Genesis 2 vision of creation. We see the trees, we see the river that runs through Eden. We see the beasts and the birds, but not the fish.

The fish don't show up in the second creation story. But most importantly, we see a garden. The garden is really central to this second story. In the first sentence, we read that there was no human to till the soil.

[15 : 30] The problem with not having a human is that there's no one to take care of the garden. You know, farmers. God creates the human, and then the first thing God does is to plant a garden in Eden to the east and to place the human there.

In the first story, we learned that humans are made to create and to take care of the plants and animals. In the second story, we are told that humans are created to garden.

These end up having pretty similar meanings. Our purpose, first and foremost, is to tend to the earth. But these creation stories don't just talk about the earth. They both start by telling us that God made the earth and the heavens.

So what is heaven? Based on what we know from the creation stories, heaven seems to be the sky. God said, let there be lights in the vaults of the heavens, lights in the sky.

God says, let fowl fly over the earth across the vaults of the heavens, birds flying across the sky.

We see that sort of context a lot in the beginning of the Bible. But then we start seeing a second context, one that many of us are likely pretty familiar with.

[16 : 37] Let's look at a few examples. Look down from your heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.

Hear from heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. So based on these verses, heaven seems to be the place where God lives.

Heaven is God's dwelling place. For most of the Hebrew scriptures, the Israelites understand God to live in heaven, with God's presence on earth kept to a few very specific places, a holy tent or tabernacle, and then later a temple in Jerusalem.

In the book of Isaiah, we read something new about heaven, a prophecy that heaven, God's home, will come to earth. And Isaiah shares a vision of what he calls a new Jerusalem.

We have an image for this one as well. Isaiah chapter 2, verse 2. In the days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house will be the highest of the mountains.

[17 : 41] It will be lifted above the hills. People will stream to it. Many nations will go and say, Come, let us go up to the Lord's mountain, to the house of Jacob's God, so that God may teach us their ways, and we may walk in God's path.

Instruction will come from Zion, the Lord's word from Jerusalem. God will judge between the nations and settle the disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools.

Nation will not take up sword against nation. They will no longer learn how to make war. Isaiah gives us a vision of humans streaming to God's house so that they can learn from God, and also brings back this idea that ruling in the kingdom of God looks like gardening, turning swords into plows.

In Isaiah's vision of a new heaven and a new Jerusalem and a new earth, we are returning to the garden. A few centuries later, Jesus Christ comes telling people that he is bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth with his ministry, and teaches his disciples to pray to God, Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

How does Jesus bring the kingdom of heaven? Not through taking over other kingdoms as some of his followers expect. Instead, Jesus brings heaven to earth by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and washing people's feet, tending to his community so that they can rule alongside him.

[19 : 09] A garden is the last place Jesus goes before he dies, and of course in the book of John, we are told that after Jesus dies and returns, he shows up to Mary as a gardener. This garden imagery shows up all the way through the last chapter of the Bible.

In Revelation 22, we get a new creation story, another vision of a new heaven and a new earth. The author John of Patmos writes, Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, through the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life, which produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month. The tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations. God's servants will worship God, night will be no more.

They won't need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine on them, and they will rule forever and ever. At the very end of the Bible, we see a lot of that same imagery from Genesis 1 and 2.

In the beginning, God creates light, and the new creation, night will be no more. We see the river and the tree of life from Genesis 2. And we also see that the servants of God, that's humanity, that's us, will rule forever alongside God.

[20 : 25] Just like in the beginning, even as we are called to rule, we are called to serve in the new creation. So how do we bring heaven to earth? The tools are given to us in the creation stories.

This next picture is from a medieval Welsh manuscript. How do we create earth as it is in heaven? Through gardening alongside Jesus. Through stewarding the land, through tending to the world around us.

That can mean the physical world, taking care of the earth that God created, and it can also mean tending to the people around us, the community. Our call from the beginning to the end of the Bible is to take care of the world we live in, so that we can create heaven on this earth.

I want to name that this feels difficult. In this city and in this moment, I certainly have felt helpless. I can commit all of my energy and all of my time to trying to make the world a better place and bring heaven to Washington, D.C.

and then the Supreme Court can rule on a bunch of cases in a row that make life much worse for all of us. And I feel deeply powerless. I wish I had advice on how to make that go away, on how to feel empowered and creative and life-giving and rested in a world that works to disempower and to exhaust.

[21 : 45] I don't really have that kind of advice. What I do have is the knowledge that we are not the first ones to feel this way. The book of Revelation was written in the context of the Roman Empire.

The Jewish people were living in poverty. Jesus came and got a good three years of earthly ministry before the people in power killed him. Then Rome had a few famously brutal emperors. These are the years that brought us Caligula and Nero. Then in 66 CE, the Jewish people finally rise up against the Roman Empire. And within five years, the Romans have demolished their towns and destroyed their temple, the place where heaven meets earth.

And then John of Patmos writes the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is not written in a time when it's easy for Christians to imagine themselves as rulers alongside God.

Like the rest of the New Testament, it is written in a time when phrases like Jesus Christ is Lord and the kingdom of heaven is near were heard as threats to the Roman Empire. And in that context, Revelation is a deeply hopeful book.

[22 : 52] To experience all of that, to experience the collective trauma that the Jewish and Christian people had experienced in the first century, and then to write the book of Revelation is a radical act of hope in new creation.

So now our final picture. In Revelation chapter 21, John of Patmos writes, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, where the former heaven and the former earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem. Let's pause for a moment to remember that Jerusalem was recently destroyed by the people currently in power. And now John is writing about a new Jerusalem.

I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, Look, God's dwelling is here with humankind.

God will dwell with them, and they will be God's people. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

[24 : 03] Then the one seated on the throne said, Look, I am making all things new. He also said, Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true. Then he said to me, All is done.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty, I will freely give water from the life-giving spring. That's Revelation 21, verses 1 through 6.

In the midst of death and destruction, this passage is a call to hope, and a call to live into our identities as creators of heaven on this earth. So as we end today, I want us to take some time and think about our goals as people made in the image of God, as co-sewards of this world.

Who are you tending to and how? How are we caring for the world and the community around us? And if that question feels stressful because we all have so much going on and we don't have the bandwidth to add something else to our plates, I'd encourage you all to think about a second question.

Who is tending to you and how are you finding rest? Like the God who created us. Thank you.