

biblestudy: september 2019

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

September 1, 2019 Text: Genesis 1:1-5, 2:1-4a “In the Beginning, God”

What new can be said about this text? Maybe that is the point. In some ways, these verses form the foundation for all else. God is first. Everything else is icing on the cake.

These accounts of creation already include the rhythm of work and rest (Genesis 2:2). The Old Testament writers do not let go of this emphasis on Sabbath. It is a gift from God (Exodus 16:29). It is a day to be kept holy (Exodus 20:8). It is a command from God (Leviticus 16:31, 19:30). It was taken very seriously. (Numbers 15:32-36). It is a source of joy (Isaiah 56:2). It is a sign of God's relationship with God's people (Ezekiel 20:12). And then Jesus continued to talk about it. The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8). Sabbath was created for humankind (Mark 2:27). Later New Testament writers still give this emphasis. Sabbath rest still continues as a gift to God's people (Hebrews 4:9-11).

With this strong continuance of the theme of Sabbath, it is easy to forget that this seventh day of rest followed six days of creative work. The Sabbath Day does not release us from the responsibility of the other six days! Genesis 2:2 notes that God rested after God had “finished the work that he had done.”

The Common English Bible (and the New International Version) refers to these verses as “an account of the heavens and the earth when they

were created” (Genesis 2:4a). The King James Version and the New Revised Standard Version translate the description as “generations.” These two different renderings of the Hebrew text give us two good handles for picking up these verses. “Generations” carries with it a sense of inheritance passed on (until it reaches us). “Account” gives the feeling of a description from someone who was there---God.

All of these verses send a signal that this Creator is still at work. The Sabbath is still real. The unfolding creation is still alive. And in and through it all is the One who was there “in the beginning.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Edmond Jacob (*Theology of the Old Testament*, Harper) has written: “Creation, being a commencement, has a sequel....God makes everything, gives them independence and fixes laws for them which should automatically ensure their maintenance in virtue of a decree proclaimed once for all...other texts...make it possible for us to speak of a *creatio continua* (continuing creation)....(God) ceaselessly intervenes by his spirit and word to guarantee the preservation of creation.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Creator God, Giver of Sabbath rest and continuing Giver of the created order...”

September 8, 2019 Text: Genesis 2:4b, 7, 15-18, 21-25 “God Creates Humankind”

In some ways, this week's study texts are among the most controversial in the Bible. Just think of some of the, uh, conversations that emerge from these verses. Homosexual. Transgender. Same Sex Marriage. Divorce. Women's Rights. Me Too Movement. Global Warming. Ho hum. Too bad the Bible is so boring!

Ponder this: The word Adam (*ʾādām*) means ruddy, red-faced, human being). The word Eve (*Chavvâh*) comes from the word for “to live” and means life-giver. Perhaps these are names given to the persons in this account to show it is in truth the story of all of us.

Ponder this: Adam and Eve have a son Cain (Genesis 4:1). After murdering his brother, Abel, Cain slips off to another land. There he gets married (Genesis 4:17). Who were the parents of his wife? How did this line of humanity come to be? Perhaps the biblical account is not intended to spell out every detail of God's creation, not even every account of “the first family.” Just because something is not mentioned in the Bible—does that mean it is not part of God's good creation?

Ponder this: Genesis 2:7 indicates that “human being” was created out of the dirt. Genesis 2:19 indicates that all the animals and birds were also created out of the dirt. Does this suggest a biblical understanding of the kinship of all the created order? What difference does that make in how humans relate to animals?

Ponder this: Genesis 2:24 speaks of a man leaving home and becoming attached to his wife. This obviously is not the only way that men and women relate to each other, so is it possible that there are various ways men can relate to women, women relate to men, men can relate to men, and women can relate to women?

Ponder this: Human beings were created for relationships (Genesis 2:18, 20). Our relationships with other human beings are different from our relationships with animals (Genesis 2:20). Humans are tasked with responsibility for all of the created order (Genesis 1:26,30). It is as if God has invented the game, set the rules, and then turned it over to us to play according to the rules. Sorry—no more space. Okay, plenty here to ponder!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Claus Westerman (*Genesis 1-12, A Commentary*, Augsburg) says: “A basis presupposition for the interpretation of a narrative such as Genesis 2-3 is to find out what it wants to say.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Walk with me in these verses...”

September 15, 2019 Text: Exodus 19:16-21; 20:18-21 “The Thick Darkness Where God Was”

Frankly, I prefer God to come in the quiet, reflective moments. Maybe, if I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses...

Frankly, I prefer God to be in moments of great clarity, with brilliant light making my next steps clear.

Frankly, I prefer God to tell me what God wants me to know, without my having to depend on someone else to explain things to me.

In this week's study text, I'd be zero for three. God comes in the noise (Exodus 19:16). God comes in the darkness (Exodus 19:18, 20:21). God uses Moses to get the message to the people (Exodus 19:21, 20:20).

I guess God, not me, is in charge.

I am left to wonder: have I ever missed something God wanted to say to me because the message did not come packaged the way I thought it would?

These focal verses surround some of the most famous words in the Bible: the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17). God cannot always be seen in the daily flow of life. In this account, God is hidden by “thick darkness.” Maybe there is a hint there that we should not give up on the presence of God even when we cannot see it. God's truth in the Ten Commandments was hidden in the glare and glitter of the moment.

The deep burdens of life, the anguishing places of loss, the muttering places of uncertainty—they are like the thick darkness which the people of Israel experienced (Exodus 21:20). Moses steps out in behalf of the people (Exodus 20:21). There may be times in our own life experiences when someone else may have to carry faith for a while; someone else may have to bear the weight of our hurt; someone else may have to say “Yes” in the midst of mystery.

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What Someone Else Has Said:

On the flyleaf of *Faith on the Move: The History of West Market Street United Methodist Church* (Gayle Hicks Fripp, Donohue Group), Peggy Joyner has written: “It is in knowing our origin that we better understand our present. It is in learning of the sacrifices made so that we

could have this church that we increasingly appreciate its very presence.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson let your prayer begin: “Hidden God, find us...”

September 22, 2019 Text: Proverbs 8:1-3, 22-32 “God’s First Creation”

Wisdom was the first expression of God (Proverbs 8:22). In a sense, “wisdom” became the way God measured God’s work in creation: water (v. 24), mountains (v. 25), soil (v. 26), the skies (v. 28), the seas (v. 29), even humankind (v. 31). God looked at each of these creations and pronounced it good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

Wisdom is not the same thing as being smart. I may have all the facts and information and knowledge that the human brain can hold and still not be wise. Although “wisdom” is a noun, it acts like a verb. “Wisdom” is the loving, caring, helping, life-giving, beautifying expression of who we are. No wonder the writer of Proverbs saw it as God’s first creation (Proverbs 8:22).

Because wisdom was present at creation, each dimension of God’s created order is tested by that very presence of God: wisdom. Are we wise in our use of water? Are we wise in our relationships with one another? Are we wise in our responsibility of animals? Are we wise in our connection with the environment? That’s the way God judged each new dimension of God’s creation.

You and I may not have paid much attention to these texts about wisdom, but the ancient writers and teachers saw it as what Robert Wright called “one of the most contested passages of Scripture.” The argument against which the early church had to speak was a claim

that if wisdom was God’s first creation, then the Christ must have been second. “No!” “No!” The voices of Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Tertullian, Origen, Marius Victorinus, Eusebius of Caesarea—call the roll of the early church theologians—all say “No!” The Christ was not created! (John 1:1). The Christ is God! That truth is not diluted by Proverbs’ insight that wisdom was the first of creation.

These studies in Proverbs take us into some complex and confusing territories. We do well to hold the hand of Jesus Christ as we walk in these hard places.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In the late second century, a Greek Christian named Athenagoras wrote this observation on this week’s study text from Proverbs (J. Robert E. Wright, editor, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* in Volume IX, Old Testament, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, InterVarsity Press): “(The Son) is the first offspring of the Father. I do not mean that he was created, for, since God is eternal mind, he had his Word within himself from the beginning, being eternally wise. Rather did the Son come forth from God to give form and actuality to all material things...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Creator of wisdom...”

September 29, 2019 Text: Hebrews 1:1-2, 6-12 “God’s Ultimate Messenger”

What happened was embarrassing. We were lined up on opposite walls of the classroom, having an old-fashioned spelling bee. “Tragedy.” “Gratitude.” “Loyalty.” “Turmoil.” We eighth graders were nailing most of the words.

What happened was embarrassing. As best I remember, it was Naomi Culberson whose turn it was. Let’s say the word was “ultimate.” She thought for a while and then said “u-l-t-i-m-e-a-t.” Some in the class smiled in delight at a missed word; others in the class smiled because they thought she had gotten it right.

What happened was embarrassing. The class got into an uproar. Now, some were saying Naomi had spelled the word wrong. Others yelled that Naomi had been misunderstood. She actually had spelled it correctly—“u-l-t-i-m-a-t-e.” The two sides of the room were getting out of control.

What happened was embarrassing. Miss Smith, our teacher, spoke up. “We seem to disagree on how Naomi spelled the word. Let’s ask Belton; he will tell the truth.”

I was mortified. Being singled out like that might at one level might be a compliment, but I felt it as humiliation and being put at odds with classmates. I muttered, “She spelled it wrong.”

As I sat with this week’s text, that incident came to mind. God had sent a lot of messengers, a range of prophets (Hebrews 1:1), but the time came when God had to speak through a voice that would be fully true, “the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:3).

After our ancestors had heard all the voices, God sent what our title calls “God’s Ultimate Messenger.” That was a lot of pressure on our Lord---yes, much more pressure than I felt in the eighth grade---but when God wanted the full truth spoken, God came as God’s very self (Hebrews 1:3).

No, I don’t confuse myself with Jesus, but I do recognize that a point came when God said, “We seem to disagree; I’ll come myself as Truth.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Jesus Means Freedom* (Fortress Press), Ernst Kasemann wrote: “Because Christ brings together once again the Creator and the creature, he is our Lord, and his rule means grace for those who accept it, and judgment for those who oppose it.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “You are Truth, O Lord...”

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