

**Genesis Overview**  
**Sunday, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022**  
**Sardis Baptist Church**

*Over the next few years, I'll be using Sundays in Ordinary time to help our congregation engage the 66 canonical books of scripture. On applicable Sundays, I'll include a brief history of the selected book (A Word About Today's Word) as well as a homily featuring a text from that book. Both intro and homily are not intended to offer a deep dive, but rather an invitation to explore each book of scripture. Midweek emails will include a playful summary of tidbits and personal anecdotes about each week's selection. I hope you'll join us on the journey to engaging our scriptures, and carving out meaning for God's presence in our present.*

**A Word About Today's Word: Genesis**

It's not so much when our story takes place, but rather, when people start to tell our story in its current form. A thousand years before the Common Era, three thousand years before our gathering here this morning, and as my friend Nancy Davis likes to say, a long time ago, but not so long ago that it couldn't have happened yesterday, a nation begins to mature. We know this place as Israel. Located on major trade routes between large empires like Egypt and Assyria, Israel takes its place on the global stage; She has economic, political, social, and military influence.

Like any prominent monarchy, origin stories become important. Where did we come from? What does our collective personhood mean? What does our history say about who we are now and where we want to go?

*Genesis* is the origin story of Israel. But dating this origin story is difficult. This is a collection of oral stories that date back even thousands of years before they were first transcribed, and they depict

events that stretch back hundreds of millions of years. I can't give you a date. Let's just say these stories are old; really old!

The final form of the text we read today most likely dates to about 500 years before the Common Era. But even this answer is nuanced. *Genesis* isn't a manuscript written by one author. It's an edited or redacted anthology of hundreds of oral stories woven together over more than four centuries, and written by a number of voices or communities.

You may have heard of the Documentary Hypothesis – The Pentateuch: *Genesis*, along with *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy* is comprised of four primary sources or voices: J, E, P, and D. The J source, most likely written at the height of the monarchy in the tenth century BCE, uses the name *YHWH* for God, and depicts God in very anthropomorphic terms – God walks in the garden. The E source, most likely written in the Eighth century BCE as the Northern Kingdom of Israel faced certain destruction, refers to God as Elohim, and concerns itself with matters of holiness. The P source represents priestly writers, and came into being sometime in the Fifth Century BCE as Israel returned from exile in Babylon. Its stories are concerned with ritual, and orderliness, and God is depicted in more mysterious ways. The stories also seek to make sense of life after disappointment and destruction. The D source, named for the Deuteronomistic writers, is not present in *Genesis*, but dates to the Seventh Century BCE and the reforms of King Josiah.

When you read *Genesis*, it's important to remember that it wasn't ever intended to be a newspaper article. This is an anthology that represents four centuries of writers experiencing everything from prosperity to ruin to reform to exile to redemption, and seeking to make sense of God's presence in their own present. You are going to hear competing thoughts and theologies. I would encourage you to lean into the

tension. I don't think it's our job to come away with finite answers in the reading of this collection. I think it's our job to read these texts in a such a way as to provoke the questions that will help us seek meaning for own present. What is the nature and character of our God? How might the experiences of our ancestors and their very human perceptions of the divine inform the world we live in today? What is our origin? What are we creating?

## **Every Breath You Take**

**Bob Stillerman**

**A Homily for Sardis Baptist Church**

**9<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, 8/7/2022**

**Genesis 1:1-2:4a**

The first creation story in *Genesis* is the description of two deep breaths, or I suppose six short bursts and a long breath. For brevity's sake, I am going to assume our first breath lasts six days. God takes a long, deep, creative breath, *ruach* in Hebrew, and God's exhale results in six days full of goodness, and collectively a very good creation. Land, sea, and sky, filled with lights and seasons, and inhabited by flying things, and creeping things, and walking things.

And then God takes a second deep breath. A rest, or a sabbath, after a week of fulfilling work.

It's the second breath that has my attention this morning. In a chaotic world, the concept of rest feels welcome, and sacred, and hopeful.

I think for too long, we've preconditioned ourselves to believe that God worked hard for six days, or however long you may wish to describe the evolutionary process, and then God stopped. Creation was done. The cosmic clockmaker stepped back, unattached, now just a curious observer, enforcing those healthy boundaries seminary professors and

HR professionals emphasize so frequently. Good for you, God, you checked all the boxes, and then you checked out.

I don't believe God has ever stopped creating. I believe God rested. *Genesis* isn't the story of how the universe *was* created. *Genesis* is the story of how the universe, and all of its components, began to be set into motion. It's not that we *were* created. Period. It's that we are in the process of being created...Ellipsis. The world hasn't become; it's always becoming.

For me, rest in *Genesis* is a helpful literary and theological tool. The Seventh Day is a wonderful bridge between the cosmic God sorting through primordial ooze and chaos and the anthropomorphic One, walking with the first earth creatures in the Garden in chapter two, even knitting them clothes. The rest enables me to process or create the various ways in which I can interact with the divine. Sometimes, I need a mysterious God. Other times, I need a Creator who knows me in more intimate ways.

*Genesis* uses genealogies – page after page of four-syllable names – to separate its major narrative events. I find the “rest” helpful as the stories transition to consider the various stages of created life: universal life, familial life, the development of civilizations, and ultimately tribal and national life.

More than anything, I believe *Genesis*, in very subtle ways, invites every listener or reader to take a rest from the most stagnant and harmful developments of creation: systems of power.

Yes, there's a lot of violence in *Genesis*. More than any of us care for: military violence, political violence, emotional violence, domestic violence, family trauma, etc. But be careful not to interpret the inclusion of violent stories as the endorsement of violence.

Power and privilege disrupt family and community relations from the get-go. Cain murders Abel. Younger sons get lesser blessings, which is still more than their sisters and mothers. Servants and slaves are treated as property. Whole people groups are displaced. Trickery and deception abound.

And yet somehow, somehow, the players in this drama eventually decide to take a rest from the stagnancy and harm of systemic power. Joseph, himself sold into slavery by his brothers, watches Judah, the very brother who sold him, offer his own life to protect their youngest brother Benjamin. Joseph does not strike his brother; he weeps, and embraces him. At he nears the end of his life, Esau greets his brother Jacob, not with the closed fists he deserves, but with the open hands and arms of reconciliation. And though the authors don't include it, I believe with all my soul that the children of Hagar and the children of Sarah look for ways to be reconciled.

*Genesis* isn't a perfect text because perfect texts don't exist. But *Genesis* is a human text. I believe it still lives and breathes. I believe it's still being created. With a first breath, we drink in the ancient stories of creation. With a second breath, we rest, pondering their meaning. And with a third breath, we give thought to how we might bring a new sense of creation into the world.

Perhaps, *Genesis* is an invitation into the process of resurrection: the ongoing renewal and recreation of every component of the universe.

How powerful might this text be if we choose to use it in such a way as to reclaim the goodness of God; to reclaim the creative and beloved gifts of every being; to reclaim the possibility and potential of God's world?

Friends, I'm ready to take three big breaths. Won't you join me? Amen.

**Bob's Word of the Week: *Genesis* (See weekly email for version with graphics).**

**4 Sittings:** Try reading *Genesis* in 4 sittings. Sitting One: Chapters 1-11, The Primeval History; Sittings Two and Three: Chapters 12-36, The Matriarchs and Patriarchs; Siting Four: Chapters 37-50, The Joseph Novella.

**Best Name:** There are SO many to choose from, but I'll go with Methuselah. You don't live to be 969 years old without a good name!

**Best Blessing:** Jacob offers Joseph a blessing that is stronger than the blessings of eternal mountains and the bounties of everlasting hills. Not too shabby. Also of note, Judah gets teeth that are whiter than milk. Something to be said for long-term dental hygiene, right?

**Worst Blessing:** Jacob, on his deathbed, tells his sons Simeon and Levi that he wishes to "never come into your council nor be joined by your company." Yikes. Harsh. Let's also not forget that Jacob swindled his brother out of his birthright for a bowl of stew. Buyer beware!

**Coollest Creation:** Creeping things. EVERY. DAY. OF. THE. WEEK.

**Favorite Story:** I am stickler for the first creation story in chapter one. I also really like the Tower of Babel.

**Troublesome Stories:** Dinah is a very hard text. I also struggle with the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. There are also many instances where God's perceived absence and/or desire for vengeance

are troubling. The flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah come to mind.

**Themes (Some not all!):** We are created in God's image; Reconciliation and restorative justice lead to transformation, but divisiveness and punitive justice lead to brokenness; God is present, even in our growing pains; Don't forget to pay attention to the people unnamed and the voices unheard – their absence and silence speaks volumes.

**If Genesis were a band It would called...**Genesis, duh! But wait there's more! It's band that re-created itself (see what I did there?) many times. Phil Collins, once the drummer, became the lead singer. Side note: I Can't Dance was my favorite song as a 9<sup>th</sup> grader.