

BIBLE STUDY IRCA2010

Genesis 1:25-31

Imagine a fresh beginning.

See the world as God sees it, has always seen it, as God dreamed it would become in God's future. God's way lived and breathed on earth as it is in heaven.

What is it like?

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the 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. ³Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' ⁷So 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. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then 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. ¹²The 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. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ 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.' ²¹So 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. ²²God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ 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.

The poet of Genesis 1 gives form to God's view of the world. This carefully crafted poem gives voice to praise and pondering about who we are, and who we relate to – God, earth, human beings.

How did God see it all as world and life unfolded?

God saw that it was good.

Now many consider that it is failure to see what is good that is at the root of the ecological crisis we face, a crisis that is ecological in the most comprehensive sense – social, economic, political, and environmental. So this opening chapter of the Bible may have some real clues for us.

Take a closer look and these opening verses of the Bible show simplicity and balance: five episodes, five days, and part of the next one. Concise, elegant even, except when it starts talking about seeds! It goes into overload with a surplus of meaning in an apparent duplication of words, which suggests something important is being referred to. It confronts us enough to say "hey, wait up, and notice this!"

Translating literally from the Hebrew: “*Let the earth sprout-out sprouts, plants seeding seed, fruit trees making fruit, each of its own kind – with their seed in them – on the earth,*” and it was so. *And the earth brought forth....*¹

And so it repeats the words of the previous verse. This phrase *sprout-out sprouts* Ellen F. Davis calls an “ostentatious neologism”, an effect which is “magnified by the proliferation of ‘seed’ that follows here and appears again in the closing bracket” (v.29).² Something’s up: something important.

These people, who gifted us scriptures that are core to our Christian faith, know about genetic diversity and how crucial seeding plants are to sustaining life. This is not the land of continual plenty, as on the flood plains of Egypt or Mesopotamia. It is marginal land and it is a narrow corridor through which many travellers, human and others, keep moving and dispersing seeds that catch a ride.

Seeds matter. And this world as God sees it is founded on seeding and fruiting plants. The first big break in the simplicity and succinctness of this poem of praise therefore comes in order to celebrate long and loudly the marvel of seeds.

Why? Because it makes the point that the world as God sees it carries self-perpetuating fertility. Growth does not have to be engineered by prayers to Baal a.k.a., in our time, the industrialised food system.

Now the next big break to the simplicity and succinctness comes with our focus text.

²⁵God 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.

²⁶Then 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.’

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸God 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.’ ²⁹God 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. ³⁰And 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. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Take note first of the point made towards the end: green plants are food for all mobile creatures, humans included. A self-perpetuating energy source is assured from the start.

We will come back shortly to those difficult words – ‘dominion’ and ‘subdue’. For the moment, I would like us to take a look at the situation we know at home, each of us in our own place, in relation to sustaining life. Turn your mind to how, or whether, people are getting the livelihood they need – food, water, basic needs.

What is the situation in your local community? Employment/unemployment? Overworked/underpaid? Are people able to work for a living? What are the limiting factors?

****What are the key factors affecting work and livelihood in your local community?***

Small group discussion to talk with the people nearby....

¹ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.48

² *Ibid.*, p.49

Plenary: feedback from small group conversations....

Some of the things we identified in our local area, in Northland New Zealand, are these:

- Loss of local control, e.g. for processing and marketing local produce, maintaining roads, making decisions on local infrastructure
- Centralised decision-making
- Drugs, alcohol, gambling, and gang influences affecting the ability to work and hold down jobs
- Regulatory barriers to alternative energy generation and supply, house construction, water supply, drainage, etc. etc.
- Exporting people and opportunities
- Barriers to education for young people – one size does not fit all (with particular lack of fit for our First Nations people)
- Economic and cultural colonisation
- Short-term planning.

I invite you now to hold in your mind the contrast between “seeing with God”, which Genesis 1 celebrates, and “seeing through the production lens”, which dominates our contemporary contexts. This is in fact an important contrast in Hebrew Scripture – between YHWH (the Lord) and Baal.

For it is clear that the poet/writers of Genesis 1 were aware that what God sees to be good was, in fact, already being messed up. This poem does not speak about a perfect situation and it does not speak to people living virtuously. The hearers of this poem know the ups and downs of finding a place for themselves in the inhabited earth. They have not fulfilled God’s dream from the beginning, and this is the very point that the second break in the concise and elegant flow of the poem makes.

The first break at vv.11-12 was to celebrate the wonder of seeding plants; the second one is to ponder the impact of humankind. Maybe even to lament. In any case there is something serious to take note of here, underlined by the fact that it takes six verses to complete the work of episode six. Day six has a straightforward start with the creation of all the non-human land creatures, but once humankind enters something begins to jar.

Now this last creature is made “in our image”. What is more, as *adam* it is by nature connected to the topsoil – *adamah* – the very thing that is the nutrient source for seeding plants. Therefore made “in our image” means it has a special role surely in relation to this life-sustaining fundamental. Made in God’s image *Adam* needs to be able to see as God sees, and respond as God responds. To do that *Adam* is to have (my preferred translation here) *mastery among*.

The moment this is spoken there is, for the earliest hearers of this text and for us now, poignant irony. What kind of mastery have we been exercising, they ask and we ask? Does a self-perpetuating system of seeding plants need our mastery? Does the entrance of human creatures in fact make it difficult, if not impossible, for non-human creatures to thrive?

Fill the earth and subdue it?

Again there a question, as Norm Habel puts it: “no reason is given as to why a pristine Earth, having just been revealed as a source of life and fertility, should need to be ‘subdued’.”³

Hearing the call to subdue, to conquer, we are meant to be startled and to puzzle about it. For there are echoes of the so-called “conquest” of the land that continues to be Israel’s defining event. Over the centuries, more often than not outside the promised land, the people of Israel read and re-read

³ Norman Habel, “Geophany”, in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2000) p .47

the stories that talked of the promise: a land to give them life and livelihood – fruitful and continuing so – as long as they follow God’s ways. There is therefore an unstated judgment in this call to conquer the land, in Genesis 1 and in the books that follow. You can’t have the land as your own home, unless you work with it and with one another in ways that sustain its productivity.

The habitable earth can be lost to these creatures who have the power to make massive differences to the world and its other inhabitants, if they don’t see things and do things God’s way. At the end of this first chapter of Genesis there is a sense that humankind has not yet sorted out its place within the created order. For what is needed is accurate seeing and action appropriate to our place. God sees, but can and will human beings see as God sees?

Wendell Berry says that “to change one’s mind ... is to change the way one works”⁴. We must see the land as God sees it – conform our mind to God’s mind – and work with the self-perpetuating fertility of its soil and plants.

And this change of perception, this metanoia, says Ellen Davis, “like poetry, is largely a work of the insightful memory”.⁵ It will come if we remember the beginning, if we imagine a fresh beginning.

In relation to the issues we raised earlier regarding livelihood for the people in our local communities, we need to use the insight of memory and work together to imagine this kind of fresh beginning.

So let’s turn our minds to the global challenge we’ve met to consider – livelihood in every local place so that there is no more hunger. What we need to do is re-imagine what it means to live and work. Re-imagine livelihood from the insights of Genesis 1. For I suggest that the metanoia we need most of all, the metanoia that our dominant world culture needs most of all, is a change in the way we see work.

Think about this contrast: wages work and livelihood work. Work to earn money in contrast to work which sustains the life of oneself, one’s family, one’s community.

When work is defined by earning money, when work is understood to be about employment and exchange of labour for currency, labour becomes a commodity to be bought and sold. Which means dependency and vulnerability. For example, people in our countries are dependent upon businesses to provide employment, on shops to sell basic needs, on outside decision-makers (government) to regulate for fairness, on international markets, on the state of international finance, on those who have the power. We are vulnerable to too many factors outside our control.

****If we were to re-imagine work in our home place as more about livelihood and less about selling labour for wages, what would we turn our attention to?*****

****How can people in our place work in a way that contributes to the self-perpetuating nature of creation that Genesis 1 celebrates?*****

****How can we take up the call to exercise mastery to help sustain our local land community?*****

Talk with people beside you for a moment.... Feedback small group conversations – subject to time.

Sing God who carved this timeless landscape

⁴ Wendell Berry, “Going to Work,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), p.263.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p.47

⁶ “Land community” is the term used by Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 240