

In the Beginning Genesis 1:1-25

Wave after wave of deadly tornadoes have killed hundreds and left thousands without homes. There's flooding in the low-lying areas, but at the same time, fields that are free from standing water are so dry that they need irrigation. Oh, and the buffalo gnats are so bad that burqas are starting to look like practical attire for everyone. What in creation is wrong with the creation?

At times like this, it is comforting to get back to basics, to look at how things were in the beginning, to remind ourselves that God is the One Who created the heavens and the earth. For if God really did create everything, we can be confident that He also rules over everything He created.

But can we modern Christians really take comfort from these familiar verses? After all, it is this passage, more than any other, that has inspired so many skeptics of the Bible. Archeologists who discovered ancient fossils rejected the idea that the world was created in six days. Astronomers who discovered billions of stars and galaxies light-years away couldn't make sense of a firmament in which the sun, moon and stars were set. And Charles Darwin and the evolutionists gave up any notion that God had anything to do with creating life in all its diverse and fascinating forms.

And so, throughout the twentieth century, educated people were told that they shouldn't take what we have read today seriously. It's just a myth, we were told, a story that the ancient Israelites made up. It was no different from the other creation myths created by other ancient, primitive people.

But if it's a myth, what confidence can we have in the truth of God's Word? But if it's true, how can we trust the findings of modern science? How can we ever hope to understand this passage?

These are huge questions, and they have been roiling the Presbyterian Church ever since the 1880's. Presbyterians of sound faith and good will have opinions about the Bible and creation and evolution that are all over the map, and that's been true for a long time. And there's no way we can examine all the theories and all the points of view in the time it takes to preach one sermon.

So, let's first begin with what's obvious: God created the heaven and the earth. It's hard to see how anyone could reject such a basic idea and still claim to be any sort of Christian. For to believe otherwise would be to say that the universe somehow came into existence independently, that it existed before God did. And this would imply that natural forces are somehow more fundamental, somehow greater than God.

No, however else we might understand this passage, it is obvious that it teaches that God came first, before anything else. It tells us that God is unimaginably powerful, that He created out of nothing the basic building blocks that make up everything else. As Moses put it so long ago, God said, "Let there be light: and there was light."

And isn't that interesting – that's exactly what the modern astronomers also say came first. Oh, they don't put it exactly that way. They say that there was a "big bang," a tremendous explosion of energy that took place between 13 and 14 billion years ago. But they do say that light was the first thing that came bursting into being.

But what about the next thing that God made – this firmament that somehow divides the waters? Now, I don't pretend to know exactly what God meant by it – the ancients seem to have thought that it was a solid, bowl-like expanse in which all the stars were set. We know that's not right – we know that the stars extend out in space much farther than the naked eye can see.

But the text doesn't say that this firmament was solid. It just says that, whatever it was, it divided the waters above from those that are below. And later on in verse 17 it says that the sun, moon, and stars were set in it. Could this firmament somehow refer to the still-mysterious force of gravity, that the astronomers tell us somehow caused all those waves of energy to coalesce into gases, and then into solid objects like planets? In any event, since gravity is still a mystery to us, it seems more than a bit unfair to expect Moses to explain this concept more clearly.

Okay, so what happened next? The geologists tell us that after the earth was formed, it had to cool, forming a solid crust over the still liquid magma that forms its mantle and still erupts in lava flows. As the earth's crust cooled, it fractured into plates that continue to push up against each other, forming mountains and then continents. Well, didn't Moses tell us that the earth and the seas were formed next, on the third day?

And where it comes to the creation of life, again, Moses seems to be well ahead of his time. Broadly agreeing with modern scientists, Moses tells us that plants came before animals, and that animal life was first found in the oceans. He tells us that mankind was created last of all, and even the evolutionary biologists affirm that mankind is one of the most recent of all species, that our male ancestor lived only 60,000 years ago.

No, that doesn't mean there aren't serious points of contention between modern science and the plain text of Genesis 1. The astronomers tell us that there is no way that the earth existed on day 3 before the sun came into being on day 4. The evolutionary biologists object that there were lots of land animals around before birds began to take wing. And the whole scientific community rejects the idea that any of this could have been made in just six days.

But if we are going to take seriously the idea that it was God Who created the heavens and the earth, a certain amount of humility is in order. Who are we to say that a supremely powerful God couldn't have created things the way this passage describes? Wouldn't it be more than a little cheeky of us modern humans to imagine that, with our scientific method, we can second guess God?

For it does seem that the scientific method is a poor tool to employ on an historical question. After all, the scientific method is determined by hypothesis and experimentation – you develop a theory, and then you test your theory by observation of the natural world. By this method you can make statements about what is possible, and, assuming that conditions long ago were the same as they are now, statements about what could or could not have happened in the past.

But as far as determining what actually did occur in the past, a scientist is ultimately helpless. And why? Because you can't observe the past. You can't do experiments on the past.

So the question we need to ask of this passage is not the question of the scientist: is it possible? Is it observable? Instead we need to ask the question of the historian: is it a credible source? Is it a reliable source? Or let's put the question this way: if God really did create the world, and if God were to explain what happened at the time of creation to someone with the scientific knowledge of Moses, would it make sense for God to have explained it this way?

And it turns out that when you compare this passage to the other creation narratives that were kicking around in Moses' day, Genesis 1 strikes us as quite a believable source, indeed as strikingly modern. The ancient Babylonians, for example, thought that the world was created as a result of a cosmic battle between gods representing chaos and order. They thought that after Marduk slew Tiamat, he used her dead body as the raw material to create the world.

The Egyptians were not much better. They thought that islands first arose out of the waters, but they didn't know how. Then the creator god simply appeared, and began to create other gods, by spitting them out. These other gods in turn represented and controlled different forces of nature.

In contrast, Genesis 1 is a model of restraint, free of all that polytheistic nonsense. Genesis 1 maintains that there is only one sovereign God, and that everything was created by the expression and the realization of God's perfect will.

Okay, so here's another question for a historian. How could a man of Moses' day, how could a man who lived in a world in which practically everyone believed in a multiplicity of gods, a world filled with incredibly complicated creation stories – how could such a man have possibly written this chapter? How could he have gotten the radical idea that there's just one God and that this one God created everything? How could he have gotten such an idea if God hadn't revealed it to him? How else can we explain the existence of this narrative in that time and in that place if it's not true?

Okay, so if we are to accept this passage as true, what can we learn from it? Well, how does it say God created everything? With words, with language. In other words, this passage tells us that the universe makes sense, and that its laws can be discovered and its language can be read. And this is exactly what astronomers have done as they have discovered the laws of physics. This is also what biologists are increasingly doing as they read the newly discovered language of DNA. This passage tells us that our God is a God of order, and that He created things in an orderly way.

But even more amazingly, in our responsive reading for today, John tells us that the Word of God, the same Word through which God spoke everything into existence, the same force of order and logic that produced the laws of physics and the complexities of DNA, this same Word became flesh and lived among us.

So, what does that mean for us? That if the Word of God is powerful enough to speak the world into existence, and that if this same Word of God was Jesus of Nazareth, then the things that Jesus said and did while on Earth should have equal weight with any other scientific law or

discovery. Indeed, since Jesus was the One Who wrote all those laws, we should consider His Word to be even more valuable. We shouldn't cast aside His Word just because some modern scientist might disagree with Him.

What else can we learn from this passage? That God is a God of life. After all, God could have made the Earth an austere, sterile place like Mars is. He could have given it a poisonous atmosphere of carbon dioxide and nitrogen with clouds of sulfuric acid like Venus has.

But instead God made the earth a beautiful and bountiful place, a place where life could flourish. On day three, God made the earth and the seas, and made grass and the trees to grow on the earth. And on day five, God made the whales and the birds and the cattle and the creeping things to live in the seas and the skies and on the earth. And notice what God tells all the living things in verse 22: "Be fruitful and multiply." God wanted His living creations to fill up the earth with life. And after God made all these beautiful living things, He said that His creation was good.

We learn a similar lesson in John chapter 1: that in Jesus is life, and that life was the light of men. We learn that Jesus came to bring life into the world that He had made, to bring life to people who in their sin had turned away from Him as the source of their life.

And so if it is helpful for us to study God's world as our scientists do, it is even more necessary for us to study God's Word. For only in Jesus Christ can anyone hope to have eternal life, to escape from the terrible consequences our sin has brought upon us.

No, I don't have all the answers about Genesis chapter 1. I can't tell you how it can be reconciled with modern science. But we know it is a reliable record of God's creation, and that it tells us important things about Who God is. And so even in the midst of a drought or a flood, or even if we have both of those things at the same time, we can know that the God Who created everything is a God of power and a God of order and a God of life. And for that, we can be thankful.