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The truth of our creation myth.

I don't remember what grade I was in when the following story occurred. It might have been sixth grade. It was Spanish class, taught by a teacher who was a Catholic sister, a very kind young woman who quite literally wanted nothing less than the absolute best for us, here on Earth and for all of eternity. One day in Spanish class, we were given an assignment to create a map of a Spanish-speaking country and to share our maps the next day in class. We signed up for countries on the spot. Having no idea about any countries where Spanish was spoken besides Mexico and Spain, I randomly chose Venezuela.

I went home that night and opened up the V volume of my parent's encyclopedia, something my mother had gotten one volume at a time by buying gasoline or something like that. I found Venezuela. But there was no map! Worse, there was almost nothing there about Venezuela. It was a terrible encyclopedia. No wonder it was free. That left me with a serious dilemma. The assignment was due the next day. It was getting dark. The only transportation I had to the library was my bike. So, I made a sound, logical choice.

I carefully traced a map of Rhode Island and labeled it “Venezuela”. It was a solid choice: both Venezuela and Rhode Island are along coasts, and since Rhode Island is so small, certainly, no one would have any idea what it looked like. The next day, we all took turns presenting our maps to the class. I stood up with my map. With great confidence, I told the class all about Venezuela. The sister watched with great interest. When I was done, I awaited her judgement.

Our Bible quote today is the creation story from Genesis, but I have edited heavily it to make it compact. Most people today will argue that it is not historically or scientifically accurate. In its literal content, it might well be a myth – but biblical myths tell powerful truths. Here it is:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day.

Then God said, “Let there be a space between the waters, to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth.” And evening passed and morning came, marking the second day.

Then God said, “Let the land sprout with vegetation—every sort of seed-bearing plant, and trees that grow seed-bearing fruit. And evening passed and morning came, marking the third day.

Then God said, “God made two great lights—the larger one to govern the day, and the smaller one to govern the night. He also made the stars. And God saw that it was good. And evening passed and morning came, marking the fourth day.

Then God created great sea creatures and every living thing that scurries and swarms in the water, and every sort of bird. And God saw that it was good. And evening passed and morning came, marking the fifth day.

Then God said, “Let the earth produce every sort of animal, small animals that scurry along the ground, and wild animals.” And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us.” Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.” Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day.

The first five books of the Old Testament are collectively called the Pentateuch, with “pent” meaning five; the name is from the Greek. Jews call this collection the Torah. The first of these books is Genesis. There is much in Genesis, in particular in the creation story, that resembles pre-Israelite Near Eastern creation myths. In other words, not only are the details of the story not a literal story of how the earth and life on it came about, the story wasn’t original when it was written by the ancient Israelites, these people who later became the Jews. Myths are tales told by ancient writers to explain truths about the human condition. Myths tell us how the world was created, why there is evil in the world, how good overcomes evil. The authors of the Hebrew Bible – what we call the Old Testament – used widely known myths that were prevalent in many ancient cultures before and at the time of the Israelites. In particular, the beginning of today’s passage is similar to a creation myth from the Babylonians

that we call *Enuma Elish*. There was another Babylonian story called the *Epic of Atrahasis* that had a creation and flood story in it that is very reminiscent of Genesis. The biblical creation story also resembles ancient Sumerian myths, as well as Egyptian and Canaanite creation stories. Historians have concluded that the world in which the authors of the Old Testament lived was rich in tales of creation. Israelite authors drew from a wide fund of images and ideas. They used them to craft their own tale of creation.

But here is a complaint about the Bible, and in particular, about the creation story, that many people make: these ancient creation myths, the ones that were in circulation when the Israelites were framing their own creation story, were not known to exist until recent times, in the 1800s and 1900s, when documents containing these myths were discovered. So, for most of the history of Christianity, we thought that the creation story of the Old Testament was unique, that our story wasn't derived from other stories. These literary discoveries, combined with the emergence of science, have led many people today to feel that the age of the myth should be over. Our job today is to incrementally replace myths, they say, with true scientifically-rooted history. We need to find the real truth about how we came into existence, about how the universe was created.

It's a mistake, though, to think that the knowledge of history and science means that there is in fact, no God. It's also a mistake to think that our creation story no longer contains the truth. It still tells us about our God, and it is very much the truth. The problem is that most people have lost track of how a faith records the great truths about its roots. It is done with myths.

Let's keep in mind that the Old Testament was written by many unknown authors over a very extended period of time, from perhaps, and we do not know for sure, the 1900s B.C. until 400 B.C. The Old Testament was based largely on oral stories. For hundreds of years - perhaps a thousand years - these oral stories were formed and reformed. Then they were written up, edited, reedited, and massaged, over and over, until they came to take on the form they have now. Genesis, like the Old Testament as a whole, is a highly evolved story that was created by an entire people, an advanced culture, all of whose members shared a faith and who wanted to tell the world about their faith. It is a collective story. Some call Genesis a "theological history", as opposed to a literal history. The genesis story was not meant as a scientifically accurate story; remember that science itself is a modern concept.

What was the story trying to convey? What is this theological history? At the heart of our genesis story is a God that has a passion for order, a God that can

turn chaos into a world brimming with life. The ancient world, like our world, was a terrifying jumble of empires, wars, disease, and evil. By coming up with an elegant way to explain how God created this world, the authors are capturing the order that God wants us to strive for in this world. It is a faith history that tells us how to live according to the will of God. We are being told what the world should be, not what it was at the time the myth was written. There are key differences between the pre-Israelite myths and the creation story in the Bible. This is what makes it uniquely ours. First, in our story, there is one God, rather than a bunch of petty, selfish gods battling each other and giving birth to each other. The chief Babylonia god, *Marduk*, had to fight with other gods for power. Second, our God is perfect, not a collection of highly imperfect beings that seem to be humans with special powers. God is so powerful that he does everything in the Old Testament. God creates, blesses, gives laws, judges, grieves, and saves. And our God can create with words. Third, and most critically, in the Israelite story, humans are far more important than they are in the more ancient myths. Humans in our story are made in the image of God, rather than the gods themselves being enhanced humans. Humans are thus presented as inherently good and responsible in our genesis story. Consider the line that keeps being repeated in our passage: *And God saw that it was good*. Genesis is the beginning

of the story of how God and the people who were made in God's image can work together to turn the world into something good.

The Bible is the story of the relationship between humanity and God, and the book of Genesis sets the stage for this story. In our passage today, we learn that God wants us to reign over the world, to take care of it, and to multiply and be successful. We are to thrive. We are meant to be of God's image, to be fully good. In fact, the creation story is a beautiful piece of writing that tells us what we know to be the most salient, focused, and critical aspect of our existence:

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground." Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!

Here is something very important to consider as we think about this statement that human beings are made in God's image. At the time when the creation story was written, an image of a person, such as a drawing or a sculpture, especially of an important person, like a king, often wasn't meant to physically resemble that person. Sometimes, an image wasn't meant to be a portrait, but rather, it was meant to be an embodiment of a person. An image carried the

essence of a person, and whoever possessed that image could use it to carry out that person's work. Thus, when in Genesis we are told that we are created in God's image, it means that we are commissioned to do God's work. That's why we exist. The world could be orderly and good – if only we were doing God's work, as we were meant to do. Imagine how beautiful the world would be today if this was the spirit in which all people lived, that we are responsible for the earth and its myriad of life, and most importantly, that our main purpose in this world is to do God's work.

So, what about my map of Venezuela? I stood in front of the class and created my own myth. Now, I want to be fair to the sisters who taught us. They were people who dedicated their entire lives to children. My memories of grammar school are beautiful. I was molded and valued and nurtured. And the sisters were experts at what they taught. But, there were some problems. Sometimes they couldn't find a sister who was a true expert in a subject. Like my Spanish teacher. She was not the most educated person when it came to Spanish and the part of the world that spoke it. I knew it – and I took advantage of it. That's why I had the nerve to do what I did. I explained to the class that the capital of Venezuela was *Proe-vee-donce*, which I got from, well, Providence, the capital of Rhode Island. I made up its history, natural resources, and major

products. I took this from the collective articles about South America in my parents' encyclopedia. I drew on old stories to write my own Venezuelan myth. I wove a story in which Venezuela, this country that had an uncanny resemblance to Rhode Island, was self-sufficient, had a tremendous variety of exports, and had amazing natural resources. And I got away with it. I got an A on my project.

But you know, I've wondered in recent years if that sister knew that I had made it all up. I bet she did, and she simply didn't care. One thing that's true is that while we had religion class at 8 AM – because we gave God the first and best hour of the school day - religion was blended into every subject. All day long, we were constantly being slipped little bits of information about what it meant to live the way God wants us to live. My Spanish teacher might have simply decided that her job was to make true children of God out of us, not scholars.

Maybe she knew that it was the story of how God and humans are meant to live together that matters, not the geographic shape of Venezuela or the facts about its capital, its industries and exports. This world is a very temporary, ethereal thing – while our story with God is an eternal story. As a professor of computer science, I spent over three decades teaching students about technology – something that will last for only the briefest blink of an eye compared to the story of God and humanity.

Now, in truth, I understand the importance of education and of telling the truth. What I did that day in school was not a good thing to teach kids to do. But the genesis creation myth – our creation story - lays out three key underpinning principles behind our faith: 1) we were made in the image of God, 2) this world was meant to be good, and 3) we were created to do God's work. This is why the Genesis creation story is so completely and beautifully true.