

Gospel of Creation.

Part 1 of 4

St Matt's - June 2021

Genesis 1:1-31 NRSV

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.

⁶And 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.

⁹And 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.

¹⁴And 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.

²⁰And 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.

²⁴And 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. 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.'

²⁷So 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.

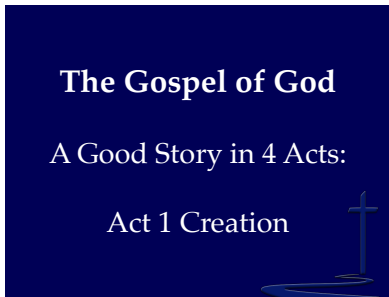
John 1:1-4, 10-14 NRSV

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Series Introduction:



This is the first in a four-part series where I want to trace out the Gospel from Genesis to Revelation. It's an attempt to trace out the Gospel as fully as I can. I am doing this for three conscious reasons:

- I want to encourage you with the glory of Gospel.
- I want to prevent us getting over focused in one aspect and neglecting others which can lead to distortion.
- I want to see us equipped to share the gospel with ease in everyday conversation. It's a story to be talked or 'gossiped'.

The four Gospel acts or chapters will come individually on a given Sunday so that they build up the total story of God's relationship to humanity, past present and future.

The four headings I will use for each part are:

- Creation
- Fall
- Redemption
- Transformation



Sermon Introduction

Today I want to explore the Gospel of Creation as undiluted good news with power to enlighten, liberate and empower. This chapter of Gospel underlies so much in our modern and yet it is not acknowledged and often ridiculed and disowned.

So let's set out a context for considering this.

What all humans know about human existence on earth is simple:

- We are born.
- We live.
- We will die.

That is not a great deal to proceed on.

It's one step above: Food and drink goes into the mouth and comes out below.

We crave an adequate frame for our existence.

We seek some reference for our human experience that makes sense of it all and enables us to rise towards what we are capable of.

There is a market for explanations, models and understandings that give account for existence:

Q How come there is a world, a universe, life, people, us, me?

We live in a world where those questions apply even if it is muted and drowned out.

The people of ancient Israel lived in a world where that was the case. Think Old Testament.

I wonder what would happen at a typical secondary school if the question was asked of students or teachers: How can we account for our existence?

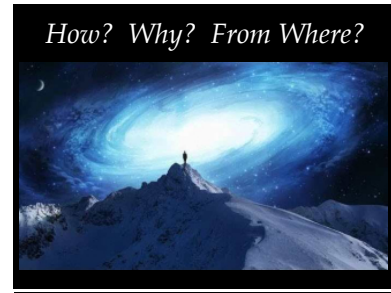
So, if you were to interview people in Dunedin today and ask:

Q How is it that this world exists as it does and what is our place in it?

What sort of answers would you get?

I fear that many would place this in the too hard basket and ignore it as too irritating or controversial?

Much easier to argue about minor issues than the big picture.



This is the question of origins.

Apart from Theists of various persuasion who relate reality and our existence to God under various names, I can only anticipate Maori mythology and various scientific answers as common responses.

Maori mythology relating to *Ranginui* and *Papatūānuku* being separated to create space for life between sky/heaven and earth has two main themes: The way creation involved going from darkness to light and from nothing to something. This mythology has a strong sense of creation's gradual process like the dawn of a day and how humanity needs to live in tune with that.

As a myth it is a serious story designed to communicate important insights. It is neither science nor theology but may well be true and worth reflecting on.

Alongside Maori mythology you might get a hard core scientific explanation in terms of time and space-matter. When you boil cosmology, physics, chemistry, biology or evolution down to their basic reality you can get to just time and space-matter. Without God they are sometimes pointed to as the basic or ultimate realities that account for everything. In this view everything is ultimately a function of time and space-matter.

That is hard core and I need to say that not every scientist is satisfied with that. There must be more than time and space matter to account for us and all that is? Some recognise 'Mind' in deep existence but that is very hard to process scientifically.

My purpose in this brief survey of possible responses is to show that there is a question and a range of answers to How is it that this world exists as it does and what is our place in it?

Israel lived in a similar context.

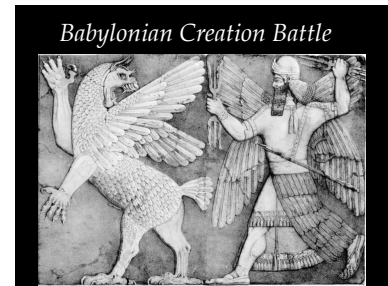
For most of her life Israel lived as a little people with a unique faith among much bigger nations and powers. Think of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia.

Being a New Zealander abroad had a dimension of this: I grew up watching American and British TV. I could pronounce their words and knew about their classic TV characters. At times Barbara and I even translated between Brits and Americans as mediators. Meanwhile they did not know our stories or our accent. We could talk with them about them but they could rarely talk with us about us.

As Israel struggled and suffered among these bigger powers she heard their stories and crafted her own reflections to address: How is it that this world exists as it does and what is our place in it?

At this point you may know that one of the oldest pieces of literature in existence is an epic Babylonian creation story named after its first words: *Enūma Eliš*. This was a story people knew in the Ancient Near East. Israel certainly heard it when in Babylonian exile if not before.

What this leading story of the day said about beginnings was that reality as heaven and earth was the result of a primordial monster being killed by her most powerful son known as ‘*Marduk*’ and then cut up to create heaven and earth. It’s a story of a chaos monster being butchered by her children from which humanity was created accounting for our spiritual dimensions.



The divine beings involved were immoral types and humans were created as drudges or servant-insects to clean up in the muck on earth and send up sweet smelling offering smoke to satisfy the many impish divine beings and their cravings.

This depicts an enchanted cosmos full of devious beings with humanity as an afterthought left to scramble in the dirt and do its best to appease the gods as they squabble among themselves.

Now assuming I have been fair in this,

Q Does this sound like a good news creation story?
Does this myth bring any hope, encouragement, dignity or consolation?

A Obviously it doesn’t and Israel recognized that.

From Israel’s experience of the living God who met Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who spoke with Moses and rescued them from Egyptian captivity she recognizes that God and humanity are not like what the Babylonian creation epic depicts.

Israel has been led to recognize the goodness of God in history and in creation and the dignity of humanity. The steadfast love of the Lord never changes, His mercies are new every day.

Q So what does Israel do among the nations?

A She tells her creation story in light of her experience of the Lord God of the Covenant.
She also goes on to tell a story of uncreation which we will get to next week.

Her story is told in a way that shares some form and vocabulary with the stories of her neighbours but makes very different music.

Genesis 1 & 2

As you may know, Genesis has two creation stories: The first one in Genesis 1 is transcendent and majestic with God as God ‘most high’. The second one has God with his hands in the dirt fashioning humanity and breathing his life-giving breath into us.



Both stories are a conscious rebuttal of other creation myths and an assertion of Israel's faith among the nations. Israel was saying:

- This is the ground of our faith.
- This is the true God of the heavens who rescued us from Pharaoh.
- This is the God who placed us in our land.
- This is the God who keeps faith forever.
- This myth is about the One True God and not just some idol or fictitious tribal mythology for local consumption.

Text

So what are we told in Genesis 1?

Q What is the good news Israel declares to her neighbours and the empires of her world?

A

1. All existence is an intentional creation. It is not an accident or an unexpected consequence. All that is framed by the heavens and the earth is willfully spoken into existence by a creator.
 - a. That covers everything. Before creation there was nothing -seriously deep nothing- over which God broods to call forth existence in all its diversity.¹
 - b. The Creator is a person and stands apart from their creation in independent existence. There is one outside the system.
 - c. Creation had a beginning – including time. There is a $t=0$ point. That is something that through the 20th century on which cosmologists and Genesis 1 came to agree on. 20th century cosmology and 6th century BC theological reflection agree on this.²
 - d. Creation is profoundly ordered. It is not the aftermath of chaotic bloodshed or heavenly warfare but careful, step-by-step process.
 - i. Cosmologies governed by many personal divine beings tend to be chaotic and random. Genesis 1 rejects such an astrological view of this by de-sacralizing the stars and features of the night sky in v.16 by mentioning the stars as an after thought when all others saw them as ruling the cosmos and human life.

16 God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—**and the stars**.
 - ii. This is why modern science in a Judeo-Christian context is possible and sustainable. If reality is constant and guaranteed as such by a creator then it can be studied with confidence as the product of a coherent and intelligent being. Historically this creation story gave rise to a science that did not fall over as all previous projects had done.
2. When we find ourselves in this creation story there is very good news indeed. Instead of being drudges or biological accidents humanity is created as the pinnacle of God's creation for dignity and honour. Humanity alone was made to be God's friend on earth and collaborate with the creator in enjoying and caring for God's creation.

Psalm 8 expresses this as wonder to God:

¹ In Latin this was described as *Creatio ex-nihilo*.

² A few quasi scientists still dispute this with theories such as multiverses or constant state theories.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.

⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,

When there is so much to rob us of our dignity and push us down. This is very good news.
Whatever the circumstances now, God made us to be his friends in dignity and honour!

Genesis 2 models this with the story of God forming humanity from the clay, breathing his life in and blessing Adam with Eve. God is personally involved in our creation and fulfilment.

3. Then to end, when creation was completed in Genesis 1:31:

³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

The text is emphatic, “Very good”. God created very good and we in this land can still see something of that.

These are just the highlights of the Good News in Genesis account of creation

Part B – Even Better in Jesus Christ.

Then in the opening of John’s Gospel all this is related to Jesus Christ whom John had personally known.

John uses a Greek concept, Logos to say, the rhyme reason and rationality of the universe was spoken by God at creation has recently been living among us.

1 In the beginning was the *Logos*/Word, and the *Logos*/Word was with God, and the *Logos*/Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4** in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

So much more could be celebrated in this but for us today the point is, All the Good News of God in creation was re-presented to humanity in Jesus Christ.

He was and is the key to creation at the beginning, in the middle and in the future.

That is very good news.

Conclusion

During this week,

- Consider where what we have looked at today might impact your own faith. Do you live by this?
 - Discuss at homegroup?
- Listen to what you hear around you in conversation and media to consider what people say about reality and their place in it.

- See if you can ask someone what they think explains why reality exists as it does.
- Be open to a possibility to share this portion of the Gospel.

