

In the Garden: 1. In the Beginning
Genesis 1
February 25, 2018
Pastor Steve Richards

Especially on a day like today, there is something within me that longs for that – to be able to walk through a garden. Earlier this month, Amanda and I went out to the University of Minnesota’s Arboretum. In the visitor center they had constructed a garden conservatory that was filled with orchids – and after weeks of winter cold, I wanted live there for a while. In the words of a hymn that is sometimes sung at funerals: *In the snow and cold of winter, there’s a spring that waits to be. Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.* Last fall I buried dozens of tulip and daffodil bulbs in this space. You can’t see it, but I know there will be a garden – that hope, the promise of life that we find in a garden is a recurring theme running through the Bible. The Bible begins in a garden in Genesis, chapters 1-3. The Bible ends in a garden in Revelation 21-22. And in the middle, we find a garden where Jesus goes to pray on his final. He is arrested in a garden, buried in a garden, and resurrected in garden where Mary identifies Jesus as the gardener. In the ancient near east, where the Bible originated, it was desert, but the king would create a lush garden with water features, orchards and flowers. If you’ve been to the Arboretum, it looked like that. Such gardens were called paradise. To be invited to walk in the king’s paradise was a high honor. God creates his own garden paradise on the third planet from the Sun and we have been given the high honor of inhabiting this garden. Over the next five weeks, we will talk about the biblical gardens and what they teach us about the Christian faith.

This morning, we begin “in the beginning.” When our daughter, Lauren, was four years old, I remember she asked, “Daddy, where did I come from?” I had this momentary panic – was it already time for the talk about the birds and the bees? And I stumbled over some words about when mommies and daddies love each other, but she had this confused look on her face and gratefully, before I could say more, she said, “I came from Duluth, didn’t I?” Knowing where we come from helps us understand who we are. In this country, it seems almost none of us are from here. We gave my mother a DNA test for her birthday, and when she got the results, there was a list of nationalities and not one was from here. What is our origin? Did we evolve in some way and was God involved in the process somehow? The Bible tells us Genesis 1:1 “in the beginning, God...” I remember a parent approaching me one Sunday with her child and saying, “Ask Pastor Steve.” I’ve learned these are the kind of questions that a parent doesn’t want to get wrong, so let Pastor Steve answer the question! So that morning, the child asked, “Who made God?” Do you know the answer? Because I don’t know. The Bible doesn’t tell us. It simply starts – “in the beginning, God.” The book of Genesis was written in Hebrew and the written form of Hebrew did not include articles like “the, a, an”, so the verse is literally “In beginning.” In other words, God had no beginning. God was. When the world as we know it began, God already was – we just don’t know what God was doing before that. Genesis does not try to prove the existence of God, because there has never been no God.

In the beginning, God created... Other cultures had their own creation stories. Maybe you took a course in college that looked at other creation stories, some written even earlier than the book of Genesis and so some have suggested that Genesis simply copied parts of other stories already in existence. That there are other creation stories should not be a surprise because every culture wants to know how they came into existence and why. When we look at other creation stories, there are similarities, but what sets Genesis apart from all others is what is different. Genesis 1 describes one God who had a plan where heaven and earth are connected. Like an artist with an empty canvas, God out of his goodness and creativity begins. An artist

might use a paint brush, but God speaks in order to bring each part of creation into existence. This not a science a lecture but poetry – an act of worship. **God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day.” And the darkness God called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day.** God spoke and light came into being. John’s gospel will tell us more about this light. John tells us this light that God spoke into existence is Jesus. The light we see in Jesus shine in the darkness and the darkness cannot extinguish it. Have you ever been at home at night when the electricity went out or even worse to be in an unfamiliar place and there is no light – to be alone in a place or a neighborhood without light is intimidating, frightening, - there is the potential to get hurt. Isn’t that why we have night lights? Am I the only one who has stubbed his toe in the dark?! And what a relief when the lights come on – or after enduring a dark and restless night to see the sun break over the horizon. Genesis is saying God has the power to speak into being what we need most and in the arrival of Jesus that creative power can be known as a force to bring light into whatever darkness we experience.

It’s not only light, but God speaks the atmosphere into existence and the sun, moon, and stars. God speaks and there is dry land and the oceans. There are plants and fish in the oceans, birds in the air, and animals of every kind, and finally God speaks humans into existence. And like an artist who steps back to look at the canvas, God looks at each part of creation and says it is good. The Hebrew word is TOV, as in mazel tov, but it means more than our word good. It means excellent and beautiful, greater than anything. And what I hear in Genesis 1 is a great masterpiece that comes into being like an orchestral crescendo, until Genesis 1:31. **God saw all that God had made, and it was very good.** It was not just good. It was paradise. And you don’t have to travel very far to see how truly beautiful this world is. Look up at the night sky or a sunrise or sunset. Or did you walk outside on Friday morning with the freshly fallen snow covering every branch of every tree. What is something beautiful – the most beautiful thing on earth that you’ve seen?

Genesis does not exist to give us information about what happened way back when the universe came into existence but to offer a message for our time. We are connected to a God who is personally involved in all that is. God’s hand – the artist’s hand, the Creator’s voice – can be seen in all that is. And if that’s creation, then what’s our responsibility? I think it is gratitude. What a gift that we get to be part of this. Just think of the millions upon millions of genetic possibilities that could have been and you and I have received life. The apostle Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: **Give thanks to God in all circumstances for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.** Life can be hard. The unexpected happens. So much is beyond our ability to control. But there is goodness – and out of God’s goodness, we are here. This morning, I woke up. It’s a new day and before I even got out of bed, I said, “Thank you, God, for this day.” Gratitude changes us. Studies have proven that a life of gratitude makes you healthier, you live longer, your low points are not as low, your relationships are stronger and in times of struggle, peace is present. Be honest, would you rather be around people who are grateful all the time or continually complain about what they don’t have?

Let me suggest a simple pattern of gratitude that could change your approach to life. What if five times a day, you stopped to give thanks? When you wake up in the morning and realize you are still here: “Thank you, God.” That’s takes five seconds. And at breakfast, even if your breakfast is a coffee you pick up in the drive thru lane, before you take that first sip: “Thank you, God.” And at lunch – even if you are in a place where you can’t say a prayer, briefly bow you head and under your breath – “Thank you, God.” You might think you’d be too embarrassed, but I think you will find people will respect you for giving thanks. Then at dinner, before you eat: “Thank

you, God.” Then at bedtime, when you put your head on the pillow but before you sleep: “Thank you, God for today.” Five times. Twenty-five seconds total, but you have remembered that we have a Creator who created you out of his goodness and is connected to you and you are grateful enough to honor and remember the one who gives you life.

Another thing that gratitude does is shape the way care for this world. It was almost two years ago that Amanda surprised me on our anniversary with a gift I always dreamed of having but never would have purchased for myself. Maybe you’ve seen a red, Mustang convertible in our parking lot. That’s the gift. I’ve had a lot of cars through the years, but this one is the only one that was a gift and because it was a gift and because of the giver of that gift, I care for it like no other car I’ve ever owned. It gets washed at least once a week, waxed a few times a year. I’ll park it at the further parking spot it that will reduce the chance that someone else will park next to me and bump my car with their door. It’s not its monetary value that prompts me to care for it as I do. It’s because it was a gift and how I care for it is one way I have of honoring the giver of the gift. God created humanity, male and female, giving us the capacity to reproduce like other animals. Genesis says: **to fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over...** Some thought this meant use it, do whatever you want with it – but that’s not what you would do with a gift that you truly valued. We are meant to care for this garden.

There was a time I would take groups to the Boundary Waters – this wilderness paradise. One of our rules was to leave every campsite better than we found it – as if there was no indication that we had been there. And if we found trash along the way, we would pick it up. It still do that when I’ve walking a path in this community or I find litter in our parking lot. It’s my responsibility to pick it up. It’s my responsibility to turn off the light when I leave a room. Or where I set the thermostat in our home. Does it really matter if I throw this water bottle in the trash or recycle it or better yet fill a reusable bottle? It matters if I remember it is a privilege and not a right to live in this garden. God has entrusted this garden to us.

And finally, in this story of Creation, God rests: **on the seventh day God rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy...** God rests not because God needs rest but because God knows we need to stop. The word Sabbath derives from the verb STOP. Sabbath day is stopping day. I was meeting with someone last Monday morning and he asked me if Mondays were my day off, and I hesitated because I used to set aside Mondays as my Sabbath – my stopping day, but what I’ve found is that I now use Mondays to do everything I could not fit into the other six days of the week. That’s not God’s design. God’s design for you is STOP. I think that’s why you are here this morning, but what about the rest of the day? What if we stopped doing and instead we rested and connected with others – put aside our smart phones, turned off the television, stopped trying to fit more in and used an entire day to be.

One evening I took our dog outside before going to bed. I looked up at the night sky and right above was the big dipper. Seven bright stars in the night sky – the farthest one is 124 light years from the earth. That means it takes light 124 years traveling at the speed of light at 186,282 miles per second. The light I see tonight originated before I was even born. That evening, I looked up and thought about how small I am and how truly great God is. God’s greatness and the goodness of creation and the words of Psalm 8 came to mind:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the

wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:4-9)

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of February 25, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Merciful God, you spoke a word and light appeared in the darkness. We pray that you would speak into our lives once again. May the same power that separated day from night and flung billions of stars into place, ignite within us a desire to hear, know and obey your word. Amen.

Monday, February 26

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-13

When God began to create the heavens and the earth—the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God's wind swept over the waters—God said, "Let there be light." And so light appeared. God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. God named the light Day and the darkness Night. There was evening and there was morning: the first day. God said, "Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters to separate the waters from each other." God made the dome and separated the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome. And it happened in that way. God named the dome Sky. There was evening and there was morning: the second day. God said, "Let the waters under the sky come together into one place so that the dry land can appear." And that's what happened. God named the dry land Earth, and he named the gathered waters Seas. God saw how good it was. God said, "Let the earth grow plant life: plants yielding seeds and fruit trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind throughout the earth." And that's what happened. The earth produced plant life: plants yielding seeds, each according to its kind, and trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind. God saw how good it was. There was evening and there was morning: the third day.

Observation: This is the start of the first of two creation stories found in Genesis. Many of Israel's neighbors in the ancient Near-Eastern world had their own creation stories, but the Jewish account was the only one that saw creation as fundamentally good. Later that goodness was lost through human choices, but in the beginning, the world came as paradise, spotless from God's hand, good from its origin.

Application: While Genesis 1 does not answer all of our questions about how God created, it provides answers to questions about who did the creating. How does it shape your perception of your life's meaning to believe that God created all that is, rather than that the universe "just happened" as a cosmic coincidence?

Prayer: Dear God, before anything else existed, Genesis says you were there. You set it all in motion. Thank you for still creating, for being the God of new beginnings and fresh starts in my life. Amen.

Tuesday, February 27

Scripture: Genesis 1:14-25

God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night. They will mark events, sacred seasons, days, and years. They will be lights in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth." And that's what happened. God made the stars and two great lights: the larger light to rule over the day and the smaller light to rule over the night. God put them in the

dome of the sky to shine on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw how good it was. There was evening and there was morning: the fourth day. God said, "Let the waters swarm with living things, and let birds fly above the earth up in the dome of the sky." God created the great sea animals and all the tiny living things that swarm in the waters, each according to its kind, and all the winged birds, each according to its kind. God saw how good it was. Then God blessed them: "Be fertile and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth." There was evening and there was morning: the fifth day. God said, "Let the earth produce every kind of living thing: livestock, crawling things, and wildlife." And that's what happened. God made every kind of wildlife, every kind of livestock, and every kind of creature that crawls on the ground. God saw how good it was.

Observation: Notice the poetic symmetry of this Genesis story. On Day 4, God placed within the heavens the sun and moon, after creating day and night (without the sun) on Day 1. On Day 5, God filled the sea and the dome of the sky that came into being on Day 2. Day 6 brought creatures to live on the dry land, whose separation from the waters was the main feature of Day 3's creative work.

Application: Israel's neighbors worshiped (and feared) the forces of nature as gods. Genesis says God was before nature, and held ultimate sway over its forces. In a world haunted by tornados, thunderstorms, earthquakes and drought, how can it give you hope to trust that God is bigger than any of those forces? Can you trust that God's redeeming love reaches beyond anything natural forces might do to us?

Prayer: Lord God, Genesis says that into the darkness, you sent light. When fear darkens my mind, help me trust your creative power to make all things right (ultimately), even if they do not seem all right (here and now). Amen.

Wednesday, February 28

Scripture: Genesis 1:26 – 2:3

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth." God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground." Then God said, "I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food. To all wildlife, to all the birds in the sky, and to everything crawling on the ground—to everything that breathes—I give all the green grasses for food." And that's what happened. God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good. There was evening and there was morning: the sixth day.

The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creation.

Observation: Genesis says humans are God's beloved children, created in God's image. This is clearer when we compare the Bible to creation stories from the Mesopotamian countries around Israel. In them, frightening, selfish gods fought one another, and made human beings to

be their slaves. In Genesis, God created human beings in God's own image, and made them for a loving relationship!

Application: What key message(s) do you find in the poetic lines of Genesis 1:27: "So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"? What does this tell you about yourself and your worth? If God created both male and female "in God's own image," what does that tell you about God?

Prayer: Dear God, before anything else existed, Genesis says you were there. You set it all in motion, and gave us a model of rest as well as work. Help me learn how to give up trying to control everything, and to rest in your care. Amen.

Thursday, March 1

Scripture: Psalm 19:1-4; Psalm 33:6-9, 12-15

Heaven is declaring God's glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork. One day gushes the news to the next, and one night informs another what needs to be known. Of course, there's no speech, no words—their voices can't be heard—but their sound extends throughout the world; their words reach the ends of the earth. God has made a tent in heaven for the sun.

The skies were made by the LORD's word, all their starry multitude by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the ocean waters into a heap; he put the deep seas into storerooms. All the earth honors the LORD; all the earth's inhabitants stand in awe of him. Because when he spoke, it happened! When he commanded, there it was!

The nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom God has chosen as his possession, is truly happy! The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees every human being. From his dwelling place God observes all who live on earth. God is the one who made all their hearts, the one who knows everything they do.

Observation: Owen Gingerich, Emeritus Professor of Astronomy at Harvard, wrote: "Rather than believe that the universe is simply meaningless, a macabre joke, I would prefer to accept a universe created with intention and purpose by a loving God, and perhaps created with just enough freedom that conscience and responsibility are part of the mix.... the elements are just right, the environment is fit for life, and slowly life forms have populated the earth."* His careful teacher's prose echoed the poetry of the ancient psalmists.

Application: Perhaps drawing on David's outdoor life as a shepherd, Psalm 19:1, 3 says "Heaven is declaring God's glory.... Of course, there's no speech, no words—their voices can't be heard—but their sound extends throughout the world." When has nature spoken most powerfully to you of God's glory, goodness and power? When have you seen nature's ability to "speak" spoiled by human carelessness or greed?

Prayer: O Lord, open my eyes to the signs of your creative power and beauty that can still be seen in our world. Fill my heart with wonder at the wisdom and grace reflected in so much I can see. Amen.

* Owen Gingerich, *God's Universe*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 96-97.

Friday, March 2

Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

Observation: Many Greek philosophers identified “the Word” (*logos*) as the great Idea behind the universe. The Hebrew Bible began (like John) with “in the beginning,” and said God spoke all that is into being. John defined what he meant by “light” more specifically. The person Jesus he had seen, heard and known, he said, was the light who broke into the world's darkness. Coming to earth, Jesus the creator was creating anew.

Application: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light” (verse 5). Have there been times when it felt to you as though darkness was trying to put out God's light in your life? In what ways have you learned to nurture your connection with Jesus, so that God's light can keep shining in and through you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, what came into being through you was life, was light. Thank you for creating new life in me as your light reaches to the dark corners of my being. Amen.

Saturday, March 3

Scripture: John 1:9-14

The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world. The light was in the world, and the world came into being through the light, but the world didn't recognize the light. The light came to his own people, and his own people didn't welcome him. But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God's children, born not from blood nor from human desire or passion, but born from God. The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Observation: The Message paraphrased the powerful poetry of John 1:12 as “whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.” John was convinced that in Christ we find our true identity. Jesus, who was God, “authorized us” to become God's children. As we claim and live into that identity, we realize more and more that God is on our side, and find that as God's children we live a life increasingly filled with grace and truth.

Application: Being born is the way each one of us begins our life in the world. John said the life Jesus brought is so qualitatively new that it's like being born, this time as a child of God. When did your spiritual journey start? In what ways has trusting and following Jesus given you a whole new life? John also knew the sad reality that many people, then and now, refused the light Jesus brought into the world. What are some of the reasons, external or internal, that people ignore or reject Jesus' light? What helped you to overcome those forces in your own life and welcome that life-giving light?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you wanted so urgently to reach me and give me new life that you came to live here as a human, to be a part of our history. Help me embody and share the good news of your gift of yourself to us. Amen.