

# A RIVER FLOWS OUT OF EDEN

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**GENESIS 2:4-19**  
**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**  
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**JUNE 30, 2013/6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

Today marks the semi-official beginning of our summer worship theme of creation. From now until the second week in September, we will be focusing on the created world, how it speaks to us about our Creator God, and what this means for us.

It is an appropriate summer theme, for obvious reasons. For many of us, summer is a time when we spend considerably more time *in* creation than the rest of the year. It is marked by road trips and camping and hiking and swimming and exploring creation, whether close to home or far away.

As Naomi mentioned, we will be celebrating creation throughout summer not only in the words that we speak and sing, but also in images and various other contributions from members of our community.

I say “semi-official” because we actually started the series last Sunday at our church campout worship service. We read the first chapter of Genesis together and explored some of the themes it contains.

But some of you missed last week, so today is kind of the second beginning ☺.

So, what better way kick off summer and a series on creation with a bit of ...

... Calvin and Hobbes.

*[Slide] (Read along)*

Frame one: Calvin says, “Space travel makes you realize how small we really are.”  
Frame two: Calvin says, “When you see earth as a tiny blue speck in the infinite reaches of space, you have to wonder about the mysteries of creation.  
Frame three: “Surely we’re all part of some great design, no more or less important than anything else in the universe. Surely everything fits together and has a purpose, a reason for being. Doesn’t it make you wonder?”

Frame four: Hobbes says, “I wonder what happens if you throw up in zero gravity.”

Calvin: “Maybe you should wonder what it’s like to walk home.

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*In the day that the Lord made the earth and the heavens... (Genesis 2:4)*

The opening chapters of Genesis reveal this grand design.

Unfortunately, though, the first two chapters of Genesis that are meant to declare that the earth is the word of a creative God often serve as little more than a staging ground for battles between science vs. faith.

We are familiar with the issues, aren’t we?

Do the first two chapters of Genesis describe a literal, seven-day creation with a literal garden and a talking snake? Are we to believe that the earth is around 4-6 thousand years old (depending on who’s calculating the genealogies recorded elsewhere in Scripture) despite all of the scientific evidence that suggests a very old earth indeed?

Well, the first—and perhaps most *important*—thing to say, is that regardless of where we come down on that issue, we must always remember that the age of the earth and the mechanisms of creation must never become a test of orthodoxy.

Yet this is precisely what often happens. Christians who believe in a more literal interpretation of Genesis 1-2 question the faith of those who think these chapters are more poetic and symbolic in nature. Likewise, those who are convinced that the earth is very old look down on those who interpret the creation stories in a more rigid and literal fashion as “fundamentalists” or worse.

We *must* be more charitable with one another in the family of faith, whatever we think about these issues.

Having said that, there are a few things that I will say.

The genre of Genesis 1-2 is not a science textbook. This is Hebrew poetry and storytelling (this is much more obvious in the Hebrew than it is in English translations). And it is poetry and storytelling that is to be located in the context of *other* ancient cultures stories about the origins of the world.

Other stories were *very* different from the Hebrew story. In the ancient Sumerian creation story, for example, the world emerges out of a violent conflict between rival

gods. In the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enûma Eliš*, humans were created to be slaves of the gods.

In contrast, in Genesis we see a poetic expression of creation as the result of the word and purpose of a good God with good plans for his world and for the creatures who are made to bear his image.

To say that this is Hebrew poetry and storytelling is **not** to say that it is not *true*. Far from it. It is simply to say that there is more than one way to communicate truth (think of parables).

To impose our 21<sup>st</sup> century rationalistic, scientific demands on the way that ancient stories are told and how they were meant to teach is to *not* treat the biblical text faithfully.

We honour the Bible when we do our best to read and hear as it was *originally meant* to be read and heard, not when we place our demands upon it (many of which are very different from the original audience!).

OT scholar Bruce Waltke is helpful on these matters:

*Genesis and science discuss entirely different matters. The subject of the Genesis creation account is God, not the forces of nature...*

*Genesis... is concerned with ultimate cause, not proximation. The intent of the creation account is not to specify the geological and genetic methods of creation but **to definitively establish that creation is an act of God's creative acts.***

Perhaps most importantly:

*[T]he purposes of Genesis and science also differ. Genesis is prescriptive, answering the questions of who and why and what ought to be, whereas the purpose of science is to be descriptive, answering the questions of what and how. The narrator of the creation is not particularly concerned with the questions a scientist asks; **rather, he wants to provide answers to the questions science cannot answer—who has created this world and for what purpose?**<sup>1</sup>*

So, in my view, we are free to incorporate the best of science regarding *how* and *when* creation may have come into being (I say *may* have because scientific consensus is never fixed, and is not the last word); but we are also, more importantly, free to read the Genesis account in Scripture as what it is: the culturally-located revelation of God about the *why* of creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 74-75.

There is much more that could be said about these matters, but again, I must stress the need for charity in dealing with one another in the church when it comes to how we read this portion of the Bible.

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At the end of the day, the practical relevance of the question of the earth's age is limited. It might be interesting from a curiosity point of view, but from the perspective of our very short time on earth, a four thousand year old earth or a 15 billion year old earth are equally remote.

The *real* questions—the questions that matters to us, the question that makes a difference in our lives, are these:

**Does this world have meaning or not? Is there an author to this story? And what is my role?**

*Gen. 2: 15—The Lord took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it...*

Last week at the campout we talked about how our God is a gardener (Claire and Nicholas had a delightful reading to bring this home for us).

God is a gardener, and we are his co-gardeners.

It's important to note what the creation story does *not* say.

It does not say that our origins were a perfect paradise from which we subsequently fell (no matter what John Milton might have said in *Paradise Lost*).

Genesis 2 does not describe a finished paradise but a project full of potential. God made a world, called it good, and then made human beings to participate in what God was bringing into being.

This is an astonishingly high privilege (one that we routinely ignore or abuse, sadly).

God planted a garden, and said "be fruitful." God did not create a perfect creation theme park and tell us to make sure we protected and preserved it.

God said, "Here is a world of beauty and wonder—go enjoy it, add to it, cultivate and develop it as my stewards and vice-regents."

Many Christians want to go back to Eden. But this seems wrongheaded to me.

We are never looking back, always ahead. Even after the fall in Genesis 3. We are not trying to get *back* to Eden; rather we are looking ahead to the city of God in Revelation 21, a new heaven and a new earth with beauty and goodness and mountains and rivers for the healing of the nations.

We are called to steward the present creation as it makes its way to the renewal and redemption that God has promised.

**Because of this, Christians, of *all* people, ought to be the most committed to care for creation, wise stewardship, and a responsible use of resources because we believe that God has made this beautiful world and entrusted its care to us.**

(It is a regular source of irony to me that those who reject God and officially embrace a view of human beings as just one more animal, no more or less special than anything else, implore us to do all we can to act as stewards for the earth and assume a specialness to human beings in that we can control the fate of the planet, while those who have the *best* reasons for stewardship look for ways to avoid the responsibility downplay our impact on creation.)

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Our text today speaks twice about streams and rivers. First, it says that there was no life in the garden because “the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth.. but a stream would rise up and water the whole face of the ground (Gen. 2:5, 6).

Later in verse 10, we read, “A river flows out of Eden to water the garden...”

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As I read these verses this week, I couldn’t help but think of what our province has witnessed over the past few weeks.

We have seen the rain that waters the earth come in torrential fashion; we have seen streams and rivers overflowing their banks to devastating effect for so many communities.

We have seen the water of the earth destroy homes and lives.

Far from the life-sustaining images of Genesis 2, we have seen water as a terror.

How are we to think of our role as stewards of God’s good creation in a context where creation can be violent and unpredictable, where tectonic plates heave and shift, where winds wreak incalculable havoc, where the rains pound down, where floods ravage the landscape?

The first thing to acknowledge is that, in a fallen world, creation groans along with human beings who struggle with sin and evil as we read in Romans 8. This is a mysterious thing indeed, but somehow the very created world has been subjected to the frustration and struggle that we have as human beings.

The world is not yet as it should be, as it will be. This applies to human beings, certainly. But it also applies to the created world.

The second thing to say is that even calamities like we have witnessed recently in our province can serve as powerful reminders of just how limited we are as human beings and how dependent we really are upon God who is the source of all life.

We can control many things about our environment. Our technological advances have given us historically unprecedented control over so many aspects of our lives. We can modify crops, extend our lives, and send information electronically around the world in seconds. We can live in climate controlled houses and do innumerable other things to make our lives more comfortable.

*But at the end of the day, we cannot make the rains fall, nor can we prevent them from falling.*

**We cannot control this creation that God has made.**

**God is the source of everything that we have and everything we are.**

He is the one in whom we live and move and have our being, as Paul said to the Athenians in Acts 17:28.

Most of us would agree to these statements in principle, but I wonder if we truly appreciate this truth, deep in our bones.

“Yes, that’s true in *general* terms,” we think. But we think we are mostly self-made individuals. We earned what we have. We are responsible for our accomplishments. We are pretty smart and resourceful and deserving. And we are very resourceful in managing in manipulating the world to suit our ends.

Until something happens to remind us that

Like a flood.

Or a cancer diagnosis.

Or a relational breakdown.

Or financial calamity.

Or any number of other things that remind us that we need God and we need each other, these two basic realities from the Garden of Eden, where God places us and ensures that we are not alone.

When it comes down to it, we are we are profoundly dependent creatures.

**Just like Adam and Eve, we find ourselves in a garden that is not of our making or choosing.**

Just like Adam and Eve, we depend upon the Lord for the rains that water the earth, for the river out of Eden that waters the garden.

We are not the authors of life. We are participants in the drama, tenders of the garden. No more, no less.

Just like Adam and Eve, we are faced with a simple challenge in our garden. Will we honour and worship God as the source of all that we have and all that we are, or will we exalt ourselves and selfishly try to be like God.

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A final word from one of my favourite theologians, Miroslav Volf (*Against the Tide*):

*[E]verything I write stems from one simple conviction: “God is love.” “Love” describes the very being of ... God; and “love” describes all of God’s dealings with the ... world, from its creation, through redemption, to consummation.*

***The Christian Bible makes clear, in manifold ways, that whatever else the world is, it is a theater of divine love—Love whose face shines on creatures; Love whose anger sometimes burns against their all-too-prevalent nastiness; Love who, divine anger notwithstanding, bears human sin and enmity so as to return us back to our original good.***

I love this image of the world as the “theater of divine love.” And I am convinced that it is true.

The beauty that we experience when hiking a mountain trail or walking along the ocean as the tide comes in or smelling fresh cut grass or gazing into the prairie sky as the sun sets after a hard rain or any of the other wonders we are witnesses are not just random impressions and experiences that we happen to make positive impression on our brains causing this or that endorphin to be released which leads to nice feelings.

These are exhibits in the divine theater of love. They are gifts of God, given in love, made to take our breath away, to cause us to bend the knee in worship to God as the source of all our life and hope.

We were made to love beauty. We were made for this garden, to keep it to till it, to love it, and to praise our Gardener who thought it up and planted it.

May we be grateful co-labourers in God's good garden.

And may our participation in this "theater of divine love" deepen our hunger for the new creation that is coming.

Amen.