

**SERMON TITLE:** "The Gospel is... Creation"  
**TEXT:** Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29  
**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church  
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January is a time of new beginnings. It is a time when many of us take stock of our lives. We evaluate the year just past and look ahead to the year ahead. We think about changes we would like to make, challenges to tackle, bad habits to break, etc.

It is a time when New Years resolutions and (mostly unfounded) optimism abound!

It is also, a time, where we sometimes lift up our heads from the hectic busyness and the ordinary routines of life to survey the big picture and to ask the big questions.

What is all of this striving and effort for?

What am I doing here?

What is the goal or purpose of this life I have been given?

What do I hope for? For myself? For those I love?

A New Year is a good time to ask these questions on an individual level. They're also good to ask of ourselves as a church.

What are we here for?

What is the reality that stands behind our existence and all the things that we do and say and sing?

Over the last little while this theme of the "big picture" has popped up in our life together.

Before Christmas, we devoted two weeks to exploring the big question of how and why we read Scripture as part of Mennonite Church Canada's "Being a Faithful Church" process.

This morning, one of our Sunday School classes began to look at a book by Stuart Murray called *The Naked Anabaptist* which looks at the big question of "what does it mean to be an Anabaptist?" "What do we, as Anabaptists contribute to the larger family of faith?" "What are our deepest convictions?" "Why do we hold them?"

Big questions.

So, in keeping with this theme, and here at the outset of 2012, I have decided to devote the next four sermons to another big question: “What is the Gospel?”

The launching point for these sermons is, at least in part, a book by Scot McKnight called *The King Jesus Gospel* which asks us to consider whether our understanding of the word “gospel” could use some clarifying or recalibration, and possibly some expanding.

It is important to ask these questions from time to time. It is important that we know who we are and why we are who we are—especially in the skeptical, post-Christian context in which we live.

We need to know our story in order to live faithfully (as Christians and as Anabaptists) amidst the many stories out there that clamour and compete for our attention and allegiance.

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Many of us, perhaps, are familiar with the word “gospel” as a synonym for “the means through by we could attain personal salvation.” The gospel is often portrayed as “stuff you need to accept/know/believe to be saved.”

We often think of “the gospel” as the basics, the bare essentials. Maybe we think of the “four spiritual laws” or invitations to salvation on the back of religious literature.

I even saw a contest online this week via the *Christian Century* where people were asked to describe the gospel in seven words (some of the answers were very creative!).

There is something good about understanding and experiencing something well enough to explain it in seven words.

But there is also the danger of making the gospel too small. One of McKnight’s criticisms in *The King Jesus Gospel* is that Christians too often equate “the gospel” with individual salvation” or “my relationship with Jesus.” This is good, but it’s not a big enough view for the word.

The word “gospel” was not, originally, a specifically religious term. The Greek word that is translated “gospel” is *euangelion* and means, literally, “good news.”

It was a word often used to proclaim the exploits and accomplishments of a great emperor, such as when Augustus, during the time just before Christ, defeated the enemies of Rome and unified the empire. Messengers would go throughout the

empire proclaiming the *euangelion*—the gospel, the “good news”—of Roman peace (*Pax Romana*).

(It’s worth noting that how “good” the news of Rome seemed to you would depend upon your willingness to obey the dictates of the empire. The peace of Rome was based on raw power, military force, and submission to the rule of the emperor.)

But the point is that the word “gospel” was not originally a religious word or a word about one’s eternal destiny—it was about *proclaiming a new reality that affected and transformed every aspect of life*.

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One of the things that McKnight says in his book is that when thinking about “the gospel,” Christians typically rush ahead in the story. We want to rush right to the “saving part.”

But we need to begin at the beginning because the gospel begins at the beginning.

The life and work of Jesus comes out of the context of a very particular story involving a very particular set of people in a particular place at a particular time (we have a big Bible for a reason!).

And this very particular people had a very particular story about how they and the world came into being.

This story is the subject of endless squabbling amongst Christians who disagree about the mechanics (six literal days, creation via a long evolutionary process, something else), but at its core it is quite simple.

It is the story of one good God who created a world and human beings to bear his image in it, out of love.

It is the story of a powerful and creative and majestic God who thunders over the waters, who shakes the desert, whose voice flashes like lightning, who sits enthroned over the cosmos (Psalm 29).

It is the story of a God who made our world and us because he loved beauty and wanted to share it.

**Christians may differ on how to read the creation narratives of Genesis, but what all Christians believe is that the world was *created* by God.**

This is really good news.

It is good news when set alongside some of the other stories in the ancient world.

The Genesis creation story is utterly unique in that the creation of the world does not come out of a violent conflict between rival gods (as in Sumerian story), nor are humans created to be slaves of the gods (as in Babylonian *Enûma Eliš*).

Genesis tells us simply that God spoke a world into existence and that it was good.

This is also good news when set alongside some of the other stories on offer in our culture.

One of the most prominent stories we hear, implicitly or explicitly, is that our world and human beings are accidental features of an inherently meaningless cosmos that came into existence not by the will of a creative and loving God, but by chance.

This, too, is a powerful story. It is a story that many people can accept on an intellectual level, but spend many of their days running from on an experiential level.

We need meaning. We crave it, we hunger for it. We long to know that there is a bigger story behind all of the wild chaos and beauty and joy and sorrow of our world and of our lives.

We need a bigger story.

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A few words change everything.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...”

“And God said, “Let there be... light, water, land, plants, trees, living creatures, human beings...”

“And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good...”

*“In the beginning, God created”*—life, goodness, possibilities, opportunities, freedom, love...

Of course, we know that things don’t stay this way for long, and this is why there is more to the gospel than creation.

But we must not lose sight of the crucial significance of what we are saying when we affirm that our world is the creation of a good God.

What it means is that our world was wanted, that it was the product of a will. It means that there is an “intendedness” to our world and to us. We were *meant to be*.

This is good news. It is news that we simultaneously want and need in the deepest part of our being, AND news that we sometimes find it difficult to believe.

Perhaps one of our biggest fears as human beings is meaninglessness. Even if we have been people of faith from the cradle, even if we have grown up in the church, been saturated in the stories of Scripture, even if we have gone to Bible school, even if we have lived a long life of committed faith... even then, perhaps, we have our fears.

Meaninglessness always hovers, always threatens.

When the diagnosis comes back with bad news. When the promising career path turns out to be a dead end. When the children make choices we had hoped and prayed they wouldn't. When the nightly news, with its news of war and famine and violence and chaos and greed, wearies us and causes us to despair.

When life seems random and chaotic and pointless and hopeless.

When our life seems like the dark void of Genesis 1.

Perhaps my most vivid experience of how crushing and hopeless the experience of meaninglessness can seem came about two years ago in Nanaimo.

I received a phone call from a social worker in our church that worked with high school kids. She was in the hospital with a young man who had just tried to take his own life. He wanted to talk to a priest. So off I went.

I listened to story after story of all kinds of abuse and mistreatment, of parents and caregivers who treated him like he was worthless and fed him lies instead of truth.

He told me that his life was just too hopeless, and that there was no reason for him to live. He didn't want to go back to an abusive home, he didn't see many prospects for improvement. He felt insignificant, discarded, used, abused, and rejected. Only 16 years old, and already tired of a life with no apparent purpose.

What do you do or say to someone like this in 45 short minutes?

Mostly, I listened. I told him that he was a child of God, made in his image, and that he was made for better things. I told him that his circumstances were no fault of his, and that there were people out there who cared about him. I told him

that God loved him. It didn't feel like much as I watched him stared blankly out the window.

A few months later I received another call from the social worker indicating that this young man was back in school, and had even been called in to help talk to another suicidal young person. Apparently, he was in a better place—he was even talking about the importance of believing in God to get through dark times. Meaninglessness had lost its hold on him.

Good news.

We may not all face this kind of crisis, but I think all of us go through times when we wonder: Is there a meaning in this story? Is there a meaning in *my* story? Does any of this matter?

That's when we need this gospel of creation.

That is when we need this good news that the same God who hovered over the dark and formless void and spoke life and goodness into existence, the same God who, in the language of Psalm 29, “thunders over the waters” with a “powerful” and “majestic” voice—this God who brings order out of chaos, who speaks new things into being, is the God who lives in us and is leading us to a future of shalom and goodness.

The same God who said, “let there be light” is the God whose coming as the light of the world we celebrate during Epiphany season and who can and does speak light and life into the dark and dying places of our own lives.

The same God who Psalm 29 proclaims as sitting enthroned as King forever is the one who Paul speaks of in this way in his letter to the Colossians:

<sup>15</sup> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).

**This same God** is the one who became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ—the event we celebrate during Epiphany—to bring peace and wholeness and reconciliation into our fractured, conflicted, and fragmented lives.

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The good news of creation is not the whole story, of course. It is good news, but it is not the whole gospel.

We know that despite the “intendedness” of our world and of our own individual lives, that creation was followed by fall, and that brokenness, disunity, conflict, sin, rebellion, and chaos have been familiar parts of the story since.

Creation is *very* good news for a world looking for meaning, but by itself it is not good enough news. There is more to the story of the gospel, which we will address in the next few weeks.

I close with the powerful words of hope from Psalm 29:11:

The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.

The God of creation and meaning and purpose is also the God blesses, strengthens, and brings peace.

Thanks be to God.