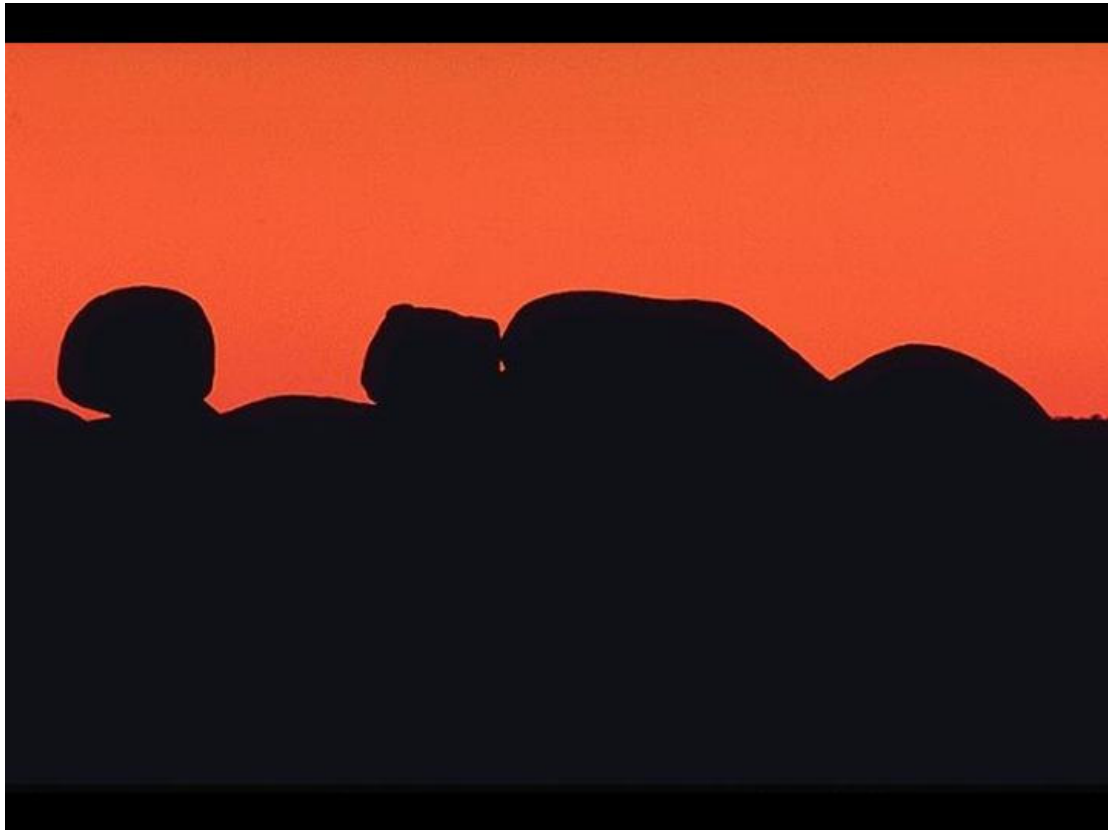


Bible Study - Session 1
Planet Earth Sunday



THE BIRTH OF EARTH
Earth Reading: Genesis 1.1-25

BEGINNING

In this study we focus on planet Earth, that fragile piece of stardust we call home, that unique planet where life exists in all its diverse splendour, that amazing floating rock whose mysteries we have only begun to discover.

What was your reaction when you first saw the image of Earth beamed back from space? How did you respond when you first grasped that Earth is indeed a green blue ball of living beings floating in air? How did you feel when you realised that this Earth, that we so easily assume is a solid rock, is in reality a fragile complex of life systems?

Of course, if you were born more recently, the image of Earth as we see it from space may be something you take for granted. If so, how is Earth different from Mars or some other planet? What makes Earth so different as a planet? How is Earth different from other planets or life worlds in science fiction books or television shows such as Star Wars?

Background

It is important to note at the outset that this study of Genesis One and the other biblical readings is not concerned with the creationism debate and the question of whether God created the world in six days. Nor is it concerned with the various arguments of science about the age of planet Earth. The scientific debate about the origins of Earth is an important issue, but not the topic under discussion here.

Our concern in this study is to explore this profound text, not as a slice of science, but as a portrayal of Earth. This is a text written thousands of years ago, but a text that captures amazing insights into God's relationship with Earth and consequently our relationship with Earth.

We will read the text with Earth as our focus. We will seek to empathise with Earth as a character in this narrative. We will read as 'Earth beings' seeking to understand our Earth origins.

Discuss: Recall for a moment how you have read Genesis One in the past. What are the dominant images you remember? What is the picture of God that you sensed from past readings or explanations of this text? Do you have any memory of Earth as a character in the story?

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Read Genesis 1.1-2

The opening line of the chapter is translated in several ways. Essentially it functions as a title, an introductory summary declaring that God created everything. The text of Genesis 2.1 offers a parallel closing summary.

Now the first thing to note is that the Hebrew word translated 'heavens' is more accurately translated 'sky' or 'skies'. If you look at verse 8 you will notice that the dome or firmament created by God is called 'Sky'. That word 'sky' in verse 8 is the same word as the term usually translated 'heavens' in verse 1.

It is clear, therefore, that this chapter is about the creation of the physical universe as people then knew it: Earth and Sky. There is nothing here about spiritual or heavenly realms.

The second key insight comes from verse two. After the summary of verse 1, the narrative introduces the first character in the story—Earth!

Verse 2 describes Earth, its primal condition and its location. Earth is already there!

What is the condition of Earth in verse 2? The Hebrew expression *tohu wabohu* probably means something like 'unformed and empty'. Earth is there, present, but has not yet assumed its final shape and has not yet been filled with life.

Where is Earth located? In darkness and under the waters of the deep! Later in verse 9 it is clear that Earth emerges from beneath these waters. The character called Earth is waiting below, a character yet to be developed by God.

And what was God doing? God's spirit or wind was hovering over the waters that covered Earth.

Discuss: What is the image this text conjures in your mind? Earth is an unformed mass, waiting deep in primal waters, with the spirit hovering above! Does this suggest to you the image of pregnancy in the waters of a womb or something else?

Some scholars in the past have tried to explain verse two by using imagery from an ancient Near Eastern source known as the Enuma Elish. In that story, the beginning of the physical universe is the result of a great battle between the god Marduk and another deity called Tiamat.

Tiamat is a watery monster who represents the forces of chaos. When Marduk conquers Tiamat he slices her in two, one half becoming the sky and the other half the land.

The possible connection with the Genesis text is twofold. The Babylonian word for Tiamat is very similar to the word for 'the deep' in Genesis 1.2. And the action of God dividing the waters on Day 2 sounds like the slicing of Tiamat in two.

Discuss: From your reading of Genesis 1.2 and the creation of Sky on Day Two, is there any indication of another deity in the text? Does the imagery suggest a battle with chaos, a birth or something else?

Read Genesis 1.9-10

After God creates light on Day One and Sky on Day Two, the character of Earth is again introduced on Day Three. Perhaps light (Day One) and space (Day Two) were needed to set the stage for Earth to take centre stage on Day Three.

God does not say 'Let there be Earth'! Earth is already waiting below in the primal waters. Instead God speaks to these waters and summons them to separate. Why? So that land or Earth might 'appear'! The image of Earth emerging from the waters recalls a birth.

More significant, perhaps, is the word 'appear'. It is remarkable that this expression should be used here. The Hebrew term employed is normally used of God's appearing, what we call a theophany! So the birth of Earth is a revelation, like the appearance of God. Earth is indeed something special, a valued part of the cosmos.

This is confirmed after God names the land 'Earth' and looks at what has been created.

Discuss: What does God see when God looks at Earth? What is God's discovery about what has just been born/burst forth from the waters below? Do you think

God is delighted with this ‘baby’? Note that Moses’ mother responded the same way to her baby (Exod. 2.2).

Read Genesis 1.11-13 and 24-25

After Earth appears, God calls on Earth to be a co-creator. He summons Earth to bring forth vegetation. God does not say, ‘Let there be plants and trees and flowers’. God works with Earth as a mediator from whom all plant life appears. Earth is the physical source of life.

Similarly, on Day Six, God does not say ‘Let there be animals and reptiles’. Rather, God again speaks to Earth and asks Earth to bring forth animal life. This means, in effect, that Earth is a mother from whom all life emerges at the impulse of God’s word. Earth is a key character in the story of Genesis One, a character who first comes forth from the water and then brings forth life.

It is clear from verses 29-30, that vegetation was crucial to sustain all other life on Earth. Do you think this implies that all creatures were originally vegetarian? Does the blessing of Noah in Gen. 9.1-6 mean that God finally allows some creatures to eat meat?

Read Genesis 1.14-19

These verses describe the origins and function of the sun, moon and stars. Why are they created? To make the sky beautiful? Much more!

The lights in the sky are for the benefit of Earth. Earth continues to be a character in the story. These sky creations are to ‘give light upon Earth’ and thereby separate the light from the darkness on Earth. They also provide the seasons needed for the cycles of life for both the fauna and flora of Earth.

Discuss: After studying Genesis One again, what is your understanding of Earth as a character in the story? Why is Earth so central? What other dimensions of Earth did you discern as you read this story?

CONSCIOUS OF THE CRISIS

It may seem that human beings are small and insignificant when compared with the size of our planet. Yet amazingly, we as a species are changing the very face and future of our planet.

The reaction of wonder we had when we first saw planet Earth from space may well change when we now see what is happening to our fragile home.

Recently a NASA photograph showed that the image of our planet is changing. The Arctic ice cap is shrinking. Scientists predict that within a century the Arctic region may be ice-free. Of course, such shrinking endangers polar bears, seals and other life. The face of our fragile planet is changing.

Discuss: The most likely explanation of this change to our planet is global warming. How does global warming happen? How should we respond to this and similar transformations of God's planet called Earth?

CONNECTING WITH CHRIST

Read John 1.1-14

The first chapter of John's Gospel connects Christ with creation in a most spectacular way. John informs us that all of creation, including planet Earth, is the result of the impulse of the Word from God (1.1-2). That Word is here identified with God. That Word, which precedes creation, is the impulse to create everything, whether it be the physical world or unseen worlds.

In the Christian tradition, the Word that precedes creation is identified as the second person of the Trinity. In Genesis One life first emerges from Earth on Day Three. In John One life, in all its dimensions, is located in the Word, the creative impulse of God that initiates creation. In a special way, this Word that brings light into the world, recalls the mystery of Day Two. What do you think life and light mean in John One?

The climax to the reading from John One is the amazing Christ connection in verse 14. This eternal Word that precedes creation becomes part of creation. This Word, that is the very God who brought Earth into being, becomes part of Earth as 'flesh and blood"! This God that caused Earth to be born out of primal water, is now born from the waters of a woman.

So the Earth story continues. God becomes part of Earth to redeem the creatures of Earth. The dwelling of God in this piece of Earth whom we know as Jesus is described using the language of God's glory 'dwelling' in the tabernacle in the wilderness. That glory or presence of God is now revealed to be present in a human being, a part of Earth.

Discuss: In the light of this text, especially verse 14, how do you think God now relates to Earth? If God becomes part of Earth in Jesus Christ, is Earth important in a unique way? How should we relate to Earth in the light of God becoming incarnate in that part of Earth called Jesus?



CLOSING WITH PRAISE

Participants may wish to conclude the session by singing the following verses selected from a song that celebrates the ten moments of creation in Genesis One. The melody of is that of 'Anna's Song' found in *Habel Hymns Volume One* and elsewhere.

FEEL THE PULSING OF GOD

(In the Ten Moments of Creation)

Moment One – The Beginning

1. Feel the pulsing of God
Silent, steady and slow
In the dark and the deep,
While Earth waits down below.
Feel the pulse!
Feel the pulsing of God.

Moment Two - Light

2. Feel the pulsing of God
In the darkness of night,
As the morning breaks forth
In a shimmer of light.
Feel the pulse!
Feel the pulsing of light!

Moment Four - Earth

4. Feel the pulsing of God
In a labour of birth,
Parting waters to watch
The arrival of Earth,
Feel the pulse!
Feel the pulsing of Earth!

Moment Five – Vegetation

5. Feel the pulsing of God
In the brown and the green,
Stirring seeds from the soil
So the bush could be seen.
Feel the pulse!
Feel the pulsing of green

PRAYER

*Jesus Christ, Word of God in human flesh,
help us to appreciate the amazing act of God in
becoming a part of this planet for us
and lead us to love this fragile home
just as you have loved us. Amen*