



TRANSFORMING HISTORY

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, CA, on Sunday, December 11, 2022

Our God created the heavens and the earth, when He spoke life-giving words that defined the world as we know it today.

As we read today from the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, I want you to observe the creative energy of God's speech, and take note of the precise definitions and measured times that God declared.

Genesis 1:1-31

¹ *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. ³ **Then God said**, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.*

⁶ **Then God said**, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." ⁷ God made the expanse, and separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. ⁸ God called the expanse heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

⁹ **Then God said**, "Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear"; and it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good. ¹¹ **Then God said**, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them"; and it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good. ¹³ There was evening and there was morning, a third day.

¹⁴ **Then God said**, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; ¹⁵ and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. ¹⁷ God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ There was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

²⁰ **Then God said**, "Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens." ²¹ God created the great sea monsters and

every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³ There was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

²⁴ **Then God said**, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind”; and it was so. ²⁵ God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good.

²⁶ **Then God said**, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ²⁸ God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” ²⁹ **Then God said**, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; ³⁰ and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food”; and it was so. ³¹ God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Did you notice that at the beginning God created the earth “without shape and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the watery deep”? What do you think about that?

I have heard many people say that God only creates “perfect” things. On the basis of that theory an entire theology has been wedged into the silent space between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2, proposing that there must have been an unspecified period of undefined and unrecorded history in which Satan (the destroyer) wrought havoc in God’s perfect world, leaving the shapeless, empty, dark place that it was in verse 2, to which God then gave light. I tell you now, that is sheer nonsense.

Here is why I say that so confidently:

If we simply let the text teach us what is real, it says that “*God created the heavens and the earth,*” and the earth He created began without particular form and empty, covered with darkness, until God acted, until He spoke. Why do we want to insert additional material that the Holy Spirit didn’t offer? We weren’t there.

If we examine our motives for doing so, we may find that we are *uncomfortable* with the story as it is. Let’s sit with that for a moment. It’s always appropriate to ask ourselves, “Why does this make me uncomfortable?”

The first two verses of the Bible tell us that God does phenomenal things—He created the heavens and the earth. Why, then, is the earth such a mess? Ahhh... And isn't that how we feel about things on the earth *right now*, today? Why has God let things get so bad? Why doesn't He fix things? If God is mighty, then He must not be good. Or, if God is good, then He must be weak.

We are uncomfortable because our image of God offends us! We can't understand Him. And we don't like Him as we think He is. So we create a fairy tale image of God as one who creates only perfect and complete things, and think, "The devil's responsible for this mess."

That is but one example of how we bend the Word of God to fit our notions of comfort and rightness. We read into the text what we prefer it to say. And by so doing, we corrupt the story.

But if the text of the first book of the Bible is insufficient to teach you what God is really like, I urge you to recognize that everything that follows in the Bible's collection of 66 books mirrors a similar process—things and people and nations *start* with a certain formlessness that belies their ultimate destiny, empty of significant evidence of their purpose, and overshadowed by the threat of darkness—until God speaks and people listen.

Were the first man and woman created to perfection? No! Or they would not so easily have fallen prey to a conniving creature. They had the capacity for perfection, but not the maturity.

In fact, this is the way the Good News about Jesus works in the world, in every generation since Adam and Eve. As Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 1:26-29): *"For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God."* God starts with ordinary vessels and transforms them into glorious vessels.

Our very sanctification—the spiritual life process that takes us from new birth to holiness—follows the same track. The hope of bodily resurrection comes at the end of a lifelong process of falling, repenting, trusting, and persisting, as we are gradually changed by the power of God's Spirit moving in us. God moves us from darkness to light.

This illustrates a vital principle for understanding properly what we may read in the Bible: Let the text speak for itself! Guard against reading into it your own thoughts, or experiences, or cultural customs. Watch out that you don't substitute your own thoughts about how things are (or should be) and how things work (or should work) for the actual text you are reading. If

you do, you will end up worshiping an idol of your own manufacture, instead of the true and living God.

When certain Pharisees chided Jesus and His disciples for not washing their hands in the ceremonial manner before eating, He replied (Mark 7:6-8,13): *“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. They worship Me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition.”*

When people in the church proclaim fanciful theories as if they were demonstrable truths (substituting their tradition for truth), two very significant things happen:

(1) Light turns to darkness. Words that should provide light instead create confusion and uncertainty, leading people into vain and useless arguments about things that don’t matter. Paul warned the church in Colossae (2:4,8):

“I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”

(2) The will of God is hindered. The Spirit of God who hovers, waiting for life-giving words to be spoken, cannot produce what He intends, and we are left with empty theories and empty lives. When Jesus came to Nazareth, His hometown, and began to teach the people in the synagogue, they were astonished at His words and works. But they took offense at Him, as if He presumed to be better than they. As a result of their contempt (instead of their trust), *“He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.”* (Matthew 13:58)

These texts illustrate that the will of God CAN be subverted (here, through unbelief; elsewhere, through speaking falsehood as though it were fact).

All the while, the Spirit of God hovers, like a servant awaiting a command. His movement turned into creative power when God uttered His will.

What is it that makes some words “life-giving”?

First, if they are TRUE, not merely in the sense that they are factual, but in the sense that they agree with God’s character and design of the world—they express the truth, as it is in Christ Jesus.

And also, if they express the WILL of God, and are uttered in assurance of His intent. What kind of prayer will heal those who are sick? *“The prayer of FAITH shall save the sick.”* (James 5:15)

But in our efforts to make God a God who only makes perfect things, we have actually turned Him into a God who can do no more than that. We have weakened Him in our minds to the point that we have difficulty believing that He can make what appears awful into something grand. We have disabled God!

And thus, we have also disabled ourselves. We are reluctant or afraid to move or act or speak when He tells us to, lest we effect no change, or make things worse.

How can we endure delays or hardship or persecution or loss? Only if we believe that God is greater than man. Only if we believe God can bring something out of nothing. Only if we believe God can turn evil into good. Only if we believe that God is THAT GREAT!

And if God can give life and meaning to what appears lifeless or has been used for evil (remember Joseph and his brothers?), cannot His people do the same? If God takes what men intend for evil and turns it to good, shouldn't we do the same?

And that is what the church has repeatedly done throughout history, transforming pagan celebrations into Christian ones. If some Christians, out of ignorance or legalistic self-righteousness, want to decry these acts of faith as a mixture or incursion of the worldly into the sacred, let them do so, but pay them no mind. It is foolishness. They know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.

Take Christmas, for instance. The first recorded Christmas celebration, the Feast of the Nativity, was in AD 336, so the earliest Christians did not celebrate Jesus' birth at all, as far as we know, as His natural birth was so overshadowed by His supernatural resurrection.

However, ancient Romans celebrated Saturn, their god of agriculture, during a two-week festival in mid-December, and marked the winter solstice on December 25th, celebrating the birth of Mithra, their sun god, on that day.

After Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in AD 312, Emperor Constantine and church leaders began "Christianizing" existing traditional holidays to weaken the pagan influences and shift the people's focus to Christ, making Him the centerpiece of their society.

Rather than trying to stamp out the social traditions, they chose strategically to absorb them and reframe them as much as possible, giving many of the already familiar elements, including wreaths, candles, feasting, and gift-giving, new Christ-centered meanings.

Perhaps Christmas began for this reason, or perhaps to emphasize the humanity of Jesus, which, as the centuries passed, seemed to fade in the light of His deity and give way to various heresies.

John advised: *“If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. ³ But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here.”* (1 John 4:2-3)

Dehumanizing Jesus also decentered the Gospel message, and left the church a powerless shell of its former dynamic community. In either case, it became necessary to refresh the Greatest Story Ever Told.

The Christmas tree, which dates back to 17th century Germany, has such meanings. The conifers we love to use are shaped like an arrowhead, pointing heavenward. At the top we mount a star, representing the Star of Bethlehem that guided the wise men to Jesus, or an angel, like the one who surprised the shepherds that glorious night outside Bethlehem. On its branches we hang a multitude of lights and shiny ornaments (originally burning candles—can you imagine?), representing the host of angels who lit up the Bethlehem sky as they sang, “Glory to God in the highest!” Turning on the lights of our tree on Friday night had that exciting impact.

Underneath the tree, we arrange our gifts for one another, like the wise men brought their gifts to young Jesus. Then, we sit down to feast together, as we will this afternoon—not just to eat and be filled, but to receive the bounty which the Lord has provided, acknowledging His provision with thanks, and sharing it together with genuine love.

For the angel told the shepherds, *“Behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”* (Luke 2:10-11)

Of course, even Christmas is subject to abuse and debauchery, as we may see in our own day. Commercialized to such a degree that the push for Christmas gift buying must begin in mid-October, Christmas eclipses even Thanksgiving (which, sadly for many, does little for consumerism, even in the greeting card industry). Excessive spending and partying, then, drive the birth of Jesus from center stage, becoming the end in themselves, with the accompanying glutony and drunkenness and wanton behaviors.

The Christian Reformation of the 16th century rebelled so strongly against the follies of the Roman Catholic Church, that almost anything Catholics did or approved, Protestants hated. For about 25 years, Christmas and other saints’ days were banned by the Puritans of England and America. And we think “Happy Holidays” is a slap in the face.

There is a notable difference between reforming ideas and behaviors and transforming them. The former works from the outside in, cutting them down and forbidding or replacing them; the latter works from the inside out, inspiring them with new life and meaning. Jesus Christ is a transformer.

If you cannot love and admire a person while correcting their misbehavior, you are not acting as Jesus would, and it would be better if you didn't connect your actions in any way with His holy name. It may not be easy to love a person who is sinning, but it is Christ's way.

Some people have such a bitter religion—always slamming one thing or another, as a supposed demonstration of their superior understanding or practice. Where is the love of Christ in that? Jesus Himself said to a woman caught in the very act of adultery, *“Neither do I condemn you.”* We could use a lot more of that attitude.

Symbols of the great Gospel message are not evil in themselves, unless and until they supplant the thing for which they have stood—until the original meaning is lost and replaced with another (whether lesser or greater).

Defending the faith is not the same as condemning sin or sinners. We must learn to *“speak the truth in love.”* For to this we have been called.

Let's remember that things that didn't start well—like the world, and our nation, and your life and mine—can still find healing and transformation through the love of God our Father, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit among us.

Then we can count it all joy and revel in His love. That's what Christmas is really about!