

“The True History of the World”

Genesis 4:2-5a

January 22, 2023

Epiphany Season

Pr. Josh Anderson

Last Sunday, we began a new sermon series on some of the first chapters of the Bible, Genesis 4-12, which describe for us the earliest days of human history.

As I mentioned last Sunday, the earliest chapters of Genesis, particularly, chapters 1-11, are written to give us not just some general principles of creation, sin, and God’s redemption of the human race, but also to give us the true history of the world.

This is important, because the last century seen the rise to a lot of speculation and apparently new discoveries about the history of the human race.

Over the last 80 years or so, in a novel development, it has been posited, and is now assumed, in our newspapers, museums, and textbooks, that the human race evolved from less developed species into pre-human figures, and finally into humans as we more or less know them today.

This means that modern assumption is that not only human beings evolved very slowly, but that human culture evolved very slowly as well, beginning with stone instruments, then agricultural methods, some kind of language, and eventually the capacity for written language.

And the idea is that all of this happened over hundreds and hundreds of thousands of years, if not millions of years.

In contrast, Genesis 4 describes the very first years of the human race, as Adam and Eve are driven out of the garden of Eden and begin to give birth to children, who intermarry with each other and have families of their own.

The picture of humanity in Genesis is very different from what is assumed by our culture today.

Humans, according to Genesis, were the special creation of God on the sixth day of creation, and immediately capable of language and moral reasoning, and very quickly were capable of kinds of technological capacities.

For example, we are told that in Genesis 4, the very first generations of human beings, that is—Adam and Eve and their children—living some 6000 years ago, farmed the ground and produced crops, domesticated and herded animals, built cities, invented musical instruments and sang songs, forged metal tools of bronze and iron, and, though it's not stated explicitly, I suspect they also possessed the capacity for written language.

The story the earliest days of the human race told by our modern world and the story told by Genesis are very different.

In one story, the modern story, human beings develop very slowly over hundreds of thousands and even millions of years, and through a combination of blind chance and their own ingenuity become the dominant species on earth. In this story, human beings are the center of the story.

Today, we possess the capacity to fly to the moon and sail the seas of the ocean and communicate instantly around the world because we have striven with all the other species in the world and we have won.

In the other story, the biblical story, human beings are the special creation of God, and from the very beginning possess, as a gift of God's grace, the capacity for advanced civilization and everything they need to begin to take dominion over all creation.

In this story, human beings are still in a privileged position with respect to creation, of course. But our position is something given to us by God, not something we have won for ourselves.

These are very different stories, and they lead to all sorts of different understandings of what human beings are and how they should relate to one another, to creation, and to God himself.

And I would argue that only one of these stories can be true.

There is no way to fit them together, no way to find some sort of compromise between the two.

And beloved, I would also confidently proclaim to you again this morning that the reason why God, in his wisdom and providence has given us these early chapters of Genesis is because he does not want us to be ignorant or foolish.

He wants us to possess the true history of the human race, and the true history of the world. And we would be wise to receive it as such.

With that in mind, listen now to God's holy and inerrant word from Genesis 4. Our sermon text today is Genesis 4:2-5a, but I'll read verse 1 as well for context.

1 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." 2 And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Prayer...

From the beginning to the end, the main theme of the Scripture is the grace, mercy and kindness of God.

And the main thing I want to emphasize here this morning is that we see God's mercy, grace and kindness overflowing here in Genesis 4.

As we heard this morning in our first reading from Genesis 1, God made human beings in his own image, after his own likeness, and he made the first man and woman for this reason - that they might be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over all creation, ruling over and glorifying all that God had made that they might offer the fruits of creation back to God with thanksgiving.

But, of course, we know that in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve broke communion with God and rebelled against him.

As a consequence of their sin, they were sentenced to death, they received God's judgment in specific curses, and they were driven out from the garden of Eden into the wider world.

The curses in particular are interesting, because they strike right at the initial commission God had given to the human race to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over creation.

To the woman, God promises pain in childbearing.

And to the man, God promises difficulty in working the ground.

But what do we read in Genesis 4?

Adam knows Eve and Eve bears a son. And then she bears another son.
And those sons grow up into men who raise animals and work the ground.

God is merciful, God is kind. Although human beings would experience difficulty and pain even death in bearing children and in taking dominion over creation, still God would bless their efforts with his grace.

We can't miss this. Even in light of human rebellion and sin, God, from the very beginning, had no intention of allowing his program for creation to be thwarted.

Despite his judgment of their sin, despite his righteous curses, right here in this passage, God is graciously enabling the human race to do exactly what he had intended for them to do at the beginning — to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over all creation.

With that mind, there are several things that we learn from this brief passage about what it means to be human in this world, and what it means to live with wisdom before God and his creation.

First, we learn that human beings are indeed made to have dominion over creation, and that to have dominion means that human beings are meant to take the raw materials of creation and glorify and perfect it through human activity.

Listen again to Genesis 4:2: *"Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground."*

Think for a minute what we are being told here. Adam and Eve, carrying with them the dominion mandate from God, instructed their sons in what they were meant to do with their lives.

They were meant to take the raw materials of God's good creation and glorify and perfect that creation through their patient and faithful work.

And so Abel becomes a shepherd. He finds a ram and a ewe (or a group of ewes) and he breeds them together.

He protects the ewes throughout their pregnancies from predators, making sure they have shelter and food and water. Abel helps them give birth, and watches over the lambs as they grow.

Slowly, his small herd grows, over time, and produces milk and wool and all sorts of gifts for his family.

Abel is taking the raw material of creation - sheep, and through his own human creativity and attention, glorifies and perfects what God has made.

In the same way, Cain carefully observes the way that plants grow and reflects on the words that God taught his parents, when he said, *"Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit."*

And Cain harvests seeds from living plants and begins to sow them into the ground. But Cain doesn't do it haphazardly, he does it with intention, making sure the seeds he plants receive sunshine and water and all the things they will need to grow.

And over time, he learns and discovers what it means to cultivate plants and enable them to grow from the ground. And so his family is provided with grain and fruit and vegetables and good things to eat.

Now, if you're wondering what your calling is in this world, Genesis 4 describes it for you.

If you are a human being, you are called to take the raw materials of creation and glorify and perfect what God has made through your own creativity and faithfulness.

This, of course, doesn't mean that all of us are called to raise livestock or plant crops (though it is interesting, that for all our modern advancements, human beings are still fed the same way they were at the very beginning — through those who plant crops and those who raise livestock).

But all of us are called to "have dominion" in some way. We might work in the airline industry, building planes or flying planes or fixing planes so that human beings can travel in airplanes from place to place (and remember, airplanes are themselves built from the raw materials of creation glorified through human activity).

Or we might work as a teacher, educating younger human beings in a classroom or our homes. This too, is a noble calling. But even this instruction is intended to teach our students about God and creation and what it means to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over everything God has made.

You can apply this general principle to any worthy vocation.

Whether you are a poet or a musician or a homebuilder or a homemaker or an accountant or a police officer or a government official or a nurse or a computer programmer, you are either directly involved in taking the raw materials of creation and glorifying them through human activity — or you are doing those things which are necessary for other human beings to engage in that activity — which is, essence, what human culture is.

This is not to say that all vocations are equally valuable or valid from a Biblical perspective.

I am not at all convinced, for example, that modern casinos are necessary or helpful in the great human project of being fruitful and having dominion over the earth.

This does not mean a Christian might not, at some point, find employment at a casino as a way of providing for themselves or their family.

But it does mean that we should not have a strictly utilitarian approach to our labor — in other words, *Do I like it? And does it pay well?* are not the only questions Christians should ask when evaluating their labor in this world.

Rather, we have been given a theological lens for evaluating human work, straight from the Scriptures themselves, and the kind of labor we were made for is encapsulated in this phrase: *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”*

But in this short passage, Cain and Abel teach us about the second half of human calling. It is not enough to simply take the raw materials of creation and glorify them through our activity. We must also offer the fruits of our labor, and the fruits of creation, to God.

Listen to verses 3-5 in our text: *3 In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.*

Now, next week we'll consider why Abel's offering was accepted by God, while Cain's was not.

But today, I just want to emphasize this.

What both Cain and Abel are doing here in offering the fruit of their labors to God is fitting and right.

Now, God did not, in Genesis 1, explicitly command the human race to offer the fruits of their labor as they glorified and perfected creation back to him.

But as Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel reflected on God's goodness in creation and God's gracious kindness, even after their sin, they rightly understood that yes, this was what we were made to do.

Not only to glorify and perfect creation through our labor, but offer the fruits of those labors, the fruits of creation itself, back to God as an act of submission and thanksgiving.

All of this is, of course, made explicit later in the Scriptures. As we read in Deuteronomy this morning, Israel was to go into the promised land of Canaan, and they were to work the good land and glorify it and bring out its fruits.

They were to plant crops and prune fruit trees and dig copper out of the hills and raise herds of goats and sheep and cattle.

And then, they were to take a portion of those fruits of their labors, and they were to offer them to God as an act of thanksgiving and submission.

In this act, they were acknowledge that all the fruit of their hands — all they possessed or had created was not because of their own ingenuity or strength.

No, all of it was gift — the gracious gift of God, given to them because he loved them.

And so, when Cain and Abel work the ground and shepherd sheep, and then bring a portion of the fruits of their labors to offer them to God, they are modeling for us what it means to live with wisdom in this world, what it means to cooperate with the grain of creation itself.

When it works the way it's supposed to, it's a beautiful circle, a profound loop of grace and thanksgiving.

God gives us, in his kindness, all of creation.

And we work with our hands to take the raw materials of this created world to glorify and perfect them.

And then, we offer a portion of the fruit of our labors to God.

And this, beloved, is why giving a tithe of your labors to God is so important.

It's not just so we can have a church building and we can pay the pastor his salary. It's not just some archaic Old Testament law buried in Leviticus somewhere. It's right here, at the very beginning of the Scriptures, at the very beginning of the human race.

And the tithe is woven into all the rest of the Scriptures because when we do this, when we live in this way, when we labor with all the dignity and strength that human beings are capable of in the stuff of this good creation God has given us, and then, when we take a portion of the fruit of our labors and offer that portion to God — then, we are fulfilling the very vocation for which we were made.

Listen again to the words of the Scriptures in Genesis 4: *Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions.*

And listen again to the words of Deuteronomy, which is really just an expansion of the theological meaning of Genesis 4:

13 "And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, 14 he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. 15 And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full...And you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, 6 and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. 7 And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the LORD your God has blessed you.

Beloved, this is the beauty and dignity of what it means to be fully human.

This the beauty and dignity of what it means to live faithfully with the God who made us and all things and gave all of creation to us as a gift.

To labor faithfully in our vocations, and then to offer a portion of the fruit of our hands back to God with thanksgiving.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.