



Made by God

Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Vienna Presbyterian Church

Genesis 1:26-31

January 3, 2021

It's January 3, 2021. This year marks the end of the line for Chris and me at Vienna Presbyterian. I will conclude my ministry here in March, less than two months from now. We will miss you, but let's save our goodbyes for later in the year.

As near as I can figure it, I've preached somewhere in neighborhood of 3,500 sermons in my 42 years of ministry at VPC. That's a lot of sermons. Some sermons matter more than others. I have eight or nine sermons left before I exit. For the next two months, I will be talking about what matters most to me in terms of loving the Lord and loving people. Serving the Lord and serving people.

Let's start at the beginning, with the book about beginnings called Genesis. We try to force on Genesis questions about how God made the world. Genesis does not give a detailed scientific explanation on how God created everything. Instead, Genesis takes up a more fundamental question as to *why* God made us. Not how God made us, but why God made us.

Listen well, all you who ask yourself questions about human identity in this prolonged COVID season. Genesis addresses big existential questions like, "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" These questions are absolutely foundational to everything else that follows in holy Scripture.

I read, a few moments ago, the last five verses of Genesis 1. Take a step back and consider this first chapter in its entirety. Genesis 1 exhibits a distinctive pattern and intentional order. There are seven days, each day building on the previous one. Don't get hung up on the word "day."

“Day” in the Hebrew can refer either to a 24-hour period or a longer epoch of time.

The first 5½ days are introduced with the words, “Let there be...” “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). “Let there be a division between heaven and earth” (Genesis 1:5). “Let there be sea and land” (Genesis 1:9). “Let there be light to separate the day from the night” (Genesis 1:14).

Yet on the sixth day, there is a decisive change. “Let there be” falls away and in its place the phrase is inserted, “Let us make.” “Let us make man in our image.” The pronoun “us” can refer either to the whole company of heavenly hosts or represents the Bible’s first reference to our Trinitarian God. In any event, it’s a linguistic clue for us as readers that something momentous is about to take place.

The other thing I notice about this first chapter is that every living creature in the first 5+ days are created “according to their kind.” The phrase, “according to their kind” appears ten times in a span of fourteen verses. Vegetation and trees are created “according to their kind” (Genesis 1:11-12). Sea creatures are created “according to their kind” (Genesis 1:21). Birds are created “according to their kind” (Genesis 1:21). Livestock and wild animals are created “according to their kind” (Genesis 1:24-25).

Yet on day six, human beings are not created “according to their kind.” They are made in God’s image. “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). It’s a poetic way of saying that we are made according to God’s kind.

Some people try to differentiate image from likeness. I take these two words to be complementary of each other. They are meant to go together. Likeness underscores image. This likeness sets us apart from all other creatures God has made.

So that we will not miss this essential point, verse 27 restates this image of God theme. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Two words come to mind when I read these verses: dignity and dominion.

First word, *dignity*. “Let us create man in our image.” Every person has dignity and worth because we are created in the image of God. Our worth is not relative to our age, race, ethnicity or economic status. Life has intrinsic value because we are made in God’s image. It remains to be seen whether our western society, which is rapidly abandoning its faith in God, can maintain belief in human worth on intrinsic grounds.

Isn’t it curious that none of us shares the same fingerprint? No two fingerprints have ever been found to be exactly alike. Even identical twins with matching DNA have different fingerprints. You are, quite literally, one of a kind. There is no one else quite like you.

What is human life worth? Let me take you back to the era in which Christianity originated. First century culture was dominated by Greek and Roman influences. Life in Greco-Roman culture was often brutish. Human life was regarded as cheap and expendable. In those days, frail and

disabled infants were routinely put to death. Baby girls were considered an economic liability and were left to die of exposure. No group in the first century opposed this barbaric practice until Christians voiced their opposition.

Christians didn't stop there. They took up the plight of the poor and elderly. They elevated the status of women. They spoke out against incest and abuse.

What motivated Christians to stand up against the tide of prevailing cultural opinion? It was the Biblical doctrine of the image of God. Human life has dignity because every person is created in the image of God.

Second word, *dominion*. Our creation in the image of God carries with it the added responsibility to care for the world God has made. "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, so that they may have dominion over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26, 28).

This word "dominion" does not give us license to practice tyranny or exploitation of the earth. Dominion corresponds to our care of the earth. We are stewards of God's creation. Every Christian, according to this passage, is an environmentalist.

"Everybody made in the image of God" sounds so simple and quaint. Next Sunday, I will talk about what goes south about this divine image in us. Three chapters into Genesis and already something goes terribly wrong. Our first parents attempt to establish their identity apart from

God. The Old Testament is a sad commentary on the failed attempts to forge human identity apart from God.

Two Sundays from now, I will speak about God's remedy for this fall from God's image. Jesus comes in human form as the perfect expression of God's image. Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians that "The Son is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). Jesus comes to restore us to God's original image.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Identity is a big deal right now in American culture. My identity is in age, my race, my ethnicity, my home or possessions, my gender. Gender is being redefined again and again. My identity is in what I do. What I make. What I own. We have a tendency to build our identity on things of relative worth.

Here's the limitation of building our identity on things of relative worth. Suppose we derive our sense of worth from appearance. What happens to our sense of self if our appearance changes by accident, age, or illness? Suppose we build our sense of self on our success in school or achievement on the job. What happens to our self-worth if we don't get into the college of our choice or get passed over for a promotion? Do you see how measuring our self-worth by anything of relative value will not last?

Shift your sense of identity to things of intrinsic worth. Establish your identity in what God says about you. I am made in the image of God. I am not who or what other people say about me. I am who God says I am. It's a great

message to start this new year. I will build my identity this year on what God says about me.

I am *made* in God's image. I am *restored* into God's image through Jesus Christ. This addresses the sin problem in our lives, building our identity on anything other than God's image in us, restored through Jesus Christ. By cultivating a relationship with Christ, we are progressively transformed into God's image. We are urging you this year to more intentionally cultivate a relationship with Christ. God created us to be relational beings. This is critical to what it means to be created in the image of God. We have the capacity to enter into relationship with our Creator. Arrange your life this year in ways that will deepen your identity in Christ. Let me bring you back to our mission, "Becoming like Christ Together for the World."

Our mandate as a church is to share this good news with people. We need to become more proactive about telling people they are made in the image of God. I know. There are some people who seem to exhibit not a trace of divine image in them. Aggressive drivers and cranky neighbors come immediately to mind, but the image of God is in there someplace. Tell them that Jesus Christ came to restore them into God's image. When you tell them these things, do so with respect and dignity—because they are created in the image of God.

What matters most? The image of God. I am who God says I am. Even my sins do not cancel out being created in God's image. Jesus Christ restores me to God's image. Talk about things that matter.