

“Lord of Heaven and Earth”

Reading: Matthew 4:1-11; John 2:1-11

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According to some of the ancient Egyptians, the world began in a chaotic sea, out of which rose a pyramid-shaped hill. It was on that hill that the creator god Atum came into being of his own accord. To start giving shape to the chaos of the world, Atum created other gods to make a space for the sky, so he sneezed one god out and spat the other out to create them. These gods then went on to create the other gods. Meanwhile, Atum had a detachable eye that went out and did, well, whatever it is eyes do when they're not attached to your head, and while his eye was gone, Atum fashioned a replacement eye for himself. When the real eye came back, it was so upset that it started to weep, and out of those tears came humans.

The Akkadian creation story focuses on the terrifying chaos monster known as Tiamat, the goddess of the ocean. Out of Tiamat come the other gods and goddesses, and it's not long before they start fighting with one another. Tiamat rallies some of the gods and monsters to her side, and the god Marduk gathers the rest to his side. Marduk ends up using the wind to inflate Tiamat, and while her mouth is forced open, he fires an arrow into her and defeats her. He then uses her body to create the heavens, and he kills one of the rebel gods named Kingu and uses his blood to create humanity to be the servants of the gods. There is a Norse creation myth that is very similar, though there are of course different names for the gods, with the gods and humanity congealing out of the fluids of the original creation, and the creator god being carved up to build the world.

The ancient Greek story of creation also focuses on the battles fought by the gods. The heavens and the earth give birth to the Titans and other terrifying monsters with fifty heads and a hundred hands, and the Titan Cronus forces his parents apart and made a space for creation. The Titans then gave birth to the next generation of gods, the Olympians, of whom Zeus was their leader in the rebellion against Cronus's rule over the cosmos. The Titans were eventually overthrown and cast into the earth. Appallingly enough, it's said that Zeus created women to be a punishment for men, which says a lot about Zeus's opinion of humanity and women in particular.

The Hittites, the Sumerians, and many, many other cultures tell of creation in very similar terms. If you were to ask them how the world came about, they would focus on how the gods fought amongst themselves to gain control over one another and to tame the horrible primeval forces of chaos, how various sexual couplings gave rise to different generations of gods and parts of creation, and how humans really only enter the story as an afterthought. Not all creation myths are the same, of course, but there are an awful lot that have an awful lot of similarities.

Contrast those other explanations of the creation of the world with the story of creation told in our Bible. Instead of a whole pantheon of gods fighting for control over one another, you have only one God who is all-powerful from the start. Instead of primeval chaos monsters existing before creation that must be fought and conquered, you have the chaos of the waters of creation that simply and immediately obey the commands of God. Instead of a plethora of gods and goddesses squabbling and fornicating in their self-absorbed soap opera, and instead of detached deities who almost accidentally create a world that they don't really care about, you have one God who creates deliberately, carefully, and at each step along the way, He looks at what He has done and declares it

“good.” Instead of humans unintentionally coming forth from a defeated god’s blood, or humans being made to be servants or playthings of the gods, you have God crafting humans out of the earth and caressing them to life with His own breath and making them regents and coworkers of His creation. You find a very different sort of God who has a very different sort of relationship with His creation and with humanity in particular.

What does all of this have to do with our chapter of *The Story* for this week? We’ve read 23 chapters of *The Story* so far; the part about creation was 22 weeks ago. We’ve watched as God’s creation has been subjected to our rebellion against God, and as God has worked tirelessly ever since then to bring us and His creation back into right relationship with Him. And now, as we read the part of our story where God has opened the way to walk among us as one of us in the God-man Jesus, we need to stop and realize just how profound this moment is. What sort of God would do such a thing? Not the gods of Egypt, or Sumeria, or Babylon, or Greece. Those gods might just come down among humans, but if they did, it would be because they wanted something from us. They’re just as likely to use you for their own ends as they are to show you any sort of compassion, assuming they even notice that you exist. We make a very different claim about our God.

In fact, put in the company of those other gods, Jesus doesn’t look much like a god at all. No god worth anything would stoop to being born as a defenseless baby, a child of an everyday carpenter. No god worth anything would even bother to pursue a relationship with humans; you’d do better to just conquer them or wipe them out or send a plague on them. No god worth anything would really care that much about creation to begin with, much less be willing to die for its redemption.

And so as we read these stories of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and as we listen in while the people around Him try to figure out who He is and what He’s about, we have to realize that He’s not a very good god at first glance. He’s not a god looking for human women to sleep with or people to conquer or play tricks on. Maybe some would look for a god who is so heavenly-minded that He’s no earthly good, as some have said. Maybe He would be more godlike if He sat on top of a mountain and meditated and denied the reality of the world, if He said that everything is an illusion and this world with its pains and troubles doesn’t really matter, if He spoke in riddles and spells that no one could understand.

We see a very unexpected sort of God revealed in this incarnate Christ. He is, after all, God *incarnate* — God in flesh, God who thinks His creation is so good and so beloved that He is not embarrassed to be seen walking around in creation clothed in the stuff of creation for the purpose of redeeming creation. We see a God who is not detached from His creation or unaware of it or uncaring about it; He made it because He wanted to, and He called it very good, and He wants to make it very good once again. We see a God who is not ashamed of our earthiness.

What sorts of things does Jesus do in His early ministry? How does He reveal God to us, and show us what it means for God to save us? He does spend a lot of time preaching about heavenly things, yes: He talks about being born in the Spirit, and He preaches on the kingdom of heaven, and He teaches using parables that are kind of like riddles in that their meaning isn’t always obvious. But He also does an awful lot of *earthy* things. He’s not ashamed of the nitty gritty of human life.

We see this wonderfully scandalous story in John's gospel, the story of Jesus' first public miracle. He's at a wedding — such a *human* thing to do, to go to a party and celebrate a couple's union — but the host has failed to plan adequately, and they've run out of wine. Jesus' mother apparently knows what He's capable of, and so she pushes Him — somewhat reluctantly — to do something. But Jesus, in good, earthy fashion, loves His mom, and He cares about the fact that the wedding couple, presumably His friends, might be subject to shame for running out of wine, even though their shame would be relatively inconsequential in the scheme of things. But this is not too trivial for Him. It's apparently not a waste of His abilities. He doesn't seem to think it's a shameful thing to be counted as His first public miracle. We see a God who is not ashamed of our lives, our earthiness, our little daily troubles.

We see it in His encounters with the sick and injured. As He goes about His ministry, He gains a reputation as a powerful healer. When He is presented with a person with leprosy or someone who can't walk, He is not too horrified by their problems to reach out in compassion. He doesn't pat them on the head and tell them that if they were really spiritual, they would soldier on in spite of the pain and focus only on eternal things. No, He had compassion on their sufferings. As someone once said, Jesus came to preach but He stayed to heal; He was so moved by the people He met that He could not help but reach out to them wherever they were.

We see that His divine mission as the Son of God is tightly bound together with His willingness to be the Son of Man; divinity and humanity existing in the same person. We see it in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. He meets a woman of questionable morals who has been shamed by her community, and her community of Samaritans has in turn been shamed by the larger Jewish community to the extent that it was unusual for a Jew like Jesus to even walk through Samaria. But Jesus cuts through the shame and offers salvation and hope even to her. He doesn't *ignore* her shame, because she has done shameful things. But His mission is even for the likes of her, this earthy person who has made unworthy choices; God came even for her.

We see it in His temptation in the desert. He gets hungry when He fasts for forty days. He finds Himself tempted to use His divinity to satisfy His earthy urge for food. He's tempted by glory and power in the earthy eyes of the world. That's what the devil is tempting Him with, to show off and amaze everyone, to claim lordship based on power. It's a very human temptation. But Jesus knows that this redemption of creation can only come through sacrifice, through the earthy things of suffering and death and blood and the hard choice to trust that His mission can only be accomplished through the cross. What sort of God is this, who displays His majesty through weakness?

He's always been an unusual sort of God, a difficult one to accept. Even among the early Christians there was sometimes a tendency to deny the earthiness of Jesus, to insist that creation is inherently bad and spirit is inherently good, and in order to be spiritual people we must deny or ignore everything material. But we have a God who is not ashamed of our earthiness. He loves His creation and chose to enter into it. He doesn't want us to wallow in our earthiness, and He doesn't want His creation to remain in its fallen state; He calls us all to be redeemed into that which we were intended to be from the start: holy people in communion with God. He is not ashamed or bored by the problems we face in our lives; we can bring our burdens to Him and trust them to Him, and He will be faithful. He is not afraid of our sin: though our sin can have no place in Him, He is able to forgive us and call us to holiness.

Jesus Christ is Lord of heaven and earth. He is an unusual God, and yet He is God revealed to us and present with us. Let us bring our hurts and our burdens, our faults and our sins, and place them at His feet.



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