

EUGENE H. PETERSON



A CONVERSATION ON THE WAYS OF GOD  
FORMED BY THE WORDS OF GOD

AS KINGFISHERS  
CATCH FIRE

Praise for  
*As Kingfishers Catch Fire*

*“As Kingfishers Catch Fire* covers it all, the *A* to *Z* of Christian spirituality. It is filled with the kind of wisdom that can only come from long obedience in the same direction! It’s more than a book; it’s a gift. Thank you, Eugene!”

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—DAN BAUMGARTNER, senior pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood



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CATCH FIRE

E U G E N E H . P E T E R S O N



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# AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE



WATERBROOK

## AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE

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Some names have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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and  
Jon and Cheryl Stine,  
faithful and skilled companions  
over a lifetime of writing*

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# LETTER TO THE READER

Eugene Peterson. The brilliant pastor-poet behind the wildly successful The Message Bible and spiritual classics like *Running with the Horses* and *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. A detail you may not know is that he spent twenty-nine years as pastor of the same church in Bel Air, Maryland, faithfully sharing his heart with his congregation Sunday after Sunday and all the days in between.

Wouldn't it have been amazing to have been a fly on the wall or a person in the pew those twenty-nine years, listening to Peterson unpack "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27)? What you have in your hands—*As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed by the Words of God*—is our attempt to make that happen.

Throughout this definitive collection of teachings, Peterson is intentional in keeping the main idea the main idea: that we, as Christians, live lives of *congruence*. Put another way, that the inside matches the outside. Or as we used to hear, that we indeed practice what we preach.

With the exception of small editorial polishes here and there, these teachings are presented in their original form, without any anxiety to update. In other words, there will be references to the moon landing, nods now and then to places specific to Peterson's congregation, and phrases like "My text for today is . . ." We believe they add a charming integrity to this work, more responsible than relevant, each page honoring real time, revealing how we can "find ourselves living, almost in spite of ourselves, the Christ life in the Christ way." We hope you agree.

Sincerely,

The WaterBrook Multnomah editorial team

# PREFACE

Sixty years ago I found myself distracted. I was being tossed about by “every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14), except it was not winds of doctrines that were distracting me but the winds of the times. It was the sixties, and there was a lot going on: charismatic personalities like John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights revolution in the South, Timothy Leary and the drug culture, Earth Day and the flower children, Vietnam . . . There was so much going on—in the world, in the culture, in the church—so many important things to do, urgent voices telling me what had to be done. There was no one thing needful. There were many things needful, all clamoring for my attention.

I was living in a small town twenty miles from Baltimore, a sleepy colonial town that was fast becoming a suburb. I had been assigned by my denomination to gather and organize a congregation. I started out with a fair amount of confidence and much energy. I was well supported organizationally and financially. The personal encouragement was strong. The mission I had been called to lead was clearly articulated.

But as time went on, I found myself increasingly at odds with my advisors on matters of means, the methods proposed for ensuring the numerical and financial viability of the congregation but without even a footnote regarding the nurturing of souls. I was given books to read on demographics and sociology. I was sent to seminars on programming strategies for appealing to the secular suburban mind-set. Leadership was interpreted almost entirely from business and consumer models.

It wasn't long before I was in crisis: a chasm had developed between the way I was preaching from the pulpit and my deepest convictions on what it meant to be a pastor. I sensed my attitude toward the men and women I was gathering into a congregation was silently shaped by how I was planning to use them to succeed as a pastor developing a new congregation with little thought to serving these souls

with the bread of life. I found myself thinking competitively about other churches in town, calculating ways in which I could beat them in the numbers game.

Then three things happened about the same time that brought me to the realization I didn't know what I was doing. It began in my pulpit. I realized I didn't know how to preach. I was not a preacher. What I was doing from the pulpit each Sunday was not preaching; in fact, it had nothing to do with preaching. I was whipping up enthusiasm. I was explaining the nature of what we had to do, while arbitrarily fitting Bible texts into key places. I was using the place of worship as a bully pulpit. I had become very American in all matters of ways and means. I never wavered in my theological convictions, but I had a job to do—get a congregation up and running—and I was ready to use any means at hand to do it: appeal to the consumer instincts of people, use abstract principles to unify enthusiasm, shape goals by using catchy slogans, create publicity images that provided ego enhancement.

And then, almost at the same time, two more things happened: I heard a lecture and read a poem. The combination of lecture and poem changed everything. The two events taught me what I needed to know to become a pastor of the gospel. The lecture was given in person by Paul Tournier, a Swiss physician; the poem was written by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, long dead.

Paul Tournier in midlife had shifted the location of his medical practice from a consulting room, with its examining table and supporting laboratories and surgeries, to his living room, before a fireplace, with him holding a pipe in his hand instead of hanging a stethoscope from his neck. For the rest of his life he used words—listened to and spoken—in a setting of personal relationship as the primary means for carrying out his healing vocation. He left a way of medical practice that was primarily focused on the body and embraced a medical practice that dealt primarily with the whole person, an integrated being of body, soul, and spirit. He wrote many books and I read them all.

Driving the twenty miles home from Johns Hopkins Hospital, the site of the lecture, my wife and I commented appreciatively on Tournier's words, in the course of which she said, "Wasn't that translator great?" And I said, "What translator? There wasn't any translator." To which she said, "Eugene, he was lecturing in French. You don't know twenty words of French. Of *course* there was a translator." And then I remembered her: a woman about his age, standing to the side and a little behind him, translating his French into English. She was so unobtrusive, so

self-effacing, so modest in what she was doing that I forgot she was there, and ten minutes after the lecture, I didn't even remember she had been there.

But there was something else: Paul Tournier himself. During the lecture I had the growing feeling that who he was and what he was saying were completely congruent. He had been living for a long time in Switzerland. Precisely the way he lived and what he was now saying in Baltimore came across as an accurate and mature expression of all he had been living and writing. Just as the translator assimilated to the lecturer, her English words carrying not just the meaning but also the spirit of his French words, so his words were one with his life—not just what he knew and what he had done, but who he was.

It was a memorable experience, the transparency of that man. No dissonance between word and spirit, no pretense. And the corresponding transparency of the woman. No ego, no self-consciousness in either one of them. Later I remembered T. S. Eliot's comments on Charles Williams: "Some men are less than their works, some are more. Charles Williams cannot be placed in either class. To have known the man would have been enough; to know his books is enough. . . . [He was] the same man in his life and in his writings."<sup>1</sup>

That's the sense I had that day about Paul Tournier: he wrote what he lived and he lived what he wrote. In the lecture that day in Baltimore, he was the same man as in his books written in Switzerland. A life of congruence, with no slippage between what he was saying and the way he was living. *Congruence*. It is the best word I can come up with to designate what I realized I needed in my pastoral work.

I recalled Herman Melville's comment: "Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow."<sup>2</sup> The prow and the ship, not two different things but the same thing.

And then, not two weeks later, this poem:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

1. Charles Williams, *All Hallows' Eve* (Oxford: Benediction, 2009), introduction.

2. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Dover, 2003), 43.

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
 Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;  
 Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
 Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.<sup>3</sup>

The Christian life is the lifelong practice of attending to the details of congruence—congruence between ends and means, congruence between what we do and the way we do it, congruence between what is written in Scripture and our living out what is written, congruence between a ship and its prow, congruence between preaching and living, congruence between the sermon and what is lived in both preacher and congregation, the congruence of the Word made flesh in Jesus with what is lived in our flesh.

It is what we admire in an athlete whose body is accurately and gracefully responsive and totally submissive to the conditions of the event: Michael Jordan at one with the court, the game, the basketball, and his fellow players. Or a musical performance in which Mozart, a Stradivarius, and Itzhak Perlman fuse and are indistinguishable from one another in the music. Congruence also occurs often enough in more modest venues: a child unself-consciously at play; a conversation in which words become as movements in a ballet, revealing all manner of beauty and truth and goodness; a meal bringing friends into a quiet awareness of affection and celebration in a mingling of senses and spirits that provides something like a Eucharistic dimension to the evening.

And congruence is what we participate in as we read “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” the sonnet that gave me metaphors to identify the distinctive heart of pastoral

3. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 90.

work. Hopkins piles up a dazzling assemblage of images to fix our attention on this sense of rightness, of wholeness, that comes together when we realize the utter congruence between what a thing is and what it does: kingfisher and dragonfly catching and reflecting sun brightness, a stone tumbling over the rim of a well, a plucked violin string, the clapper of a bell sounding. What happens and the way it happens are seamless. Hopkins then proceeds to the congruence of “each mortal thing” bodying forth who and what we are. But what kingfishers and falling stones and chiming bells do without effort requires development on our part, a formation into who we truly are, a becoming in which the means by which we live are congruent with the ends for which we live. But Hopkins’s final image is not of us finally achieving what the dragonfly and plucked string do simply because they are determined by biology and physics. His final image is Christ, who lives and acts in us in such ways that our lives express the congruence of inside and outside, this congruence of ends and means, Christ as both the means and the end playing through our limbs and eyes to the Father through the features of our faces so that we find ourselves living, almost in spite of ourselves, the Christ life in the Christ way.

With Tournier’s witness and Hopkins’s metaphors working together, I finally started to get it: preaching is the weekly verbal witness to this essential congruence of what Christ *is* with his work that “plays” in us. Not just the preaching but prayers at a hospital bed, conversations with the elderly, small talk on a street corner—all the circumstances and relationships that make up the pastor’s life. Not ideas, not goals, not principles, nothing abstract or disembodied, but the good news of the “Word . . . made flesh” (John 1:14, KJV) becoming *our* flesh, our limbs and eyes. I still had a long way to go, but at least now I was being a pastor and not staying awake at night laying out a strategy or “casting a vision.”



One of the unintended consequences of this (I noticed it only in retrospect) was that I was beginning to treat my congregation with far more dignity than I had been treating them. Impatience began to diminish; condescension slowly faded out. I was learning to embrace the congregation just as they were, not how I wanted them to be. They became an integral part of the sermon. Preaching became a corporate act. Common worship was the context: singing and praying, baptisms and Eucharist, silence and blessings. But I soon realized our common worship on

Sundays was also developing tendrils that reached into homes and workplaces, casual conversations and chance meetings on the street.

I was discovering an imagination for developing a sense of narrative that kept our lives relationally together in something deeper and wider than anything we were individually. I began to weed out the depersonalizing stereotypes that identified the souls in my care as either problems to be fixed or resources to be exploited. I developed conversations that grew into stories that in turn developed into something akin to a novel in which all these people who were worshipping together were involved with one another, whether they knew it or not or even wanted to be. Congregation was not a collection of individuals but something more like a body with distinctive parts, but all the parts working organically with Christ as the head.



The sermons gathered here document this collaboration of pastor and congregation in acts of worship and a life together for twenty-nine years (1962–91) at Christ Our King Presbyterian Church (UPCUSA) in Harford County, Maryland. They are not selected because of any merit as my “best” sermons but because I have come to think of them as three decades of representative collaboration with my congregation.

A friend who had been a student of Karl Barth told me that Barth often spoke of the impossibility of conveying with accuracy in a book what was proclaimed from a pulpit, like attempting to sketch a kingfisher in flight or to describe a lightning strike when all we have to go on is what is left after the storm. Sermons copied into a book are like that. Much, maybe most, of what is involved in a sermon is left out of the book: the voice of the preacher, the congregation listening to the sermon, the worship in song and prayer and silence, the architecture of the sanctuary. That is why I am naming what is written here “kingfisher sermons.” But maybe a prayerful imagination in the reading can supply at least some of what is lost in the book.

I have organized the sermons in seven groupings under the names of Moses, David, Isaiah, Solomon, Peter, Paul, and John of Patmos. Each name identifies a distinctive approach that needs to be included in the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) that I wanted my congregation to be on familiar terms with. To give added emphasis to the “whole” counsel, I placed seven sermons in each group: seven sermons in each of the seven groupings, forty-nine sermons in all.



I wanted to enter into the biblical company of prototypical preachers and work out of the traditions they had developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When I prepare and preach a sermon, I need constant reminding that I am part of a company that has a rich and varied genealogy. I do not start from scratch. I do not make up something new. I want to develop a coherent and connected biblical imagination with my congregation, not live out of a suitcase full of cast-off items from various yard sales and secondhand stores.

Part I



“HE SPOKE AND IT  
CAME TO BE”

PREACHING IN THE COMPANY OF MOSES

# Introduction

An enormous authority and dignity have, through the centuries, developed around the first five books of the Bible, traditionally designated the Books of Moses. Over the course of many centuries, they account for a truly astonishing amount of reading and writing, study and prayer, teaching and preaching.

God is the primary concern of these books. That accounts for the authority and the dignity. But it is not only God; *we* get included. That accounts for the widespread and intense human interest. We want to know what's going on. We want to know how we fit into things. We don't want to miss out.

The Books of Moses are made up mostly of stories and signposts. The stories show us God working with and speaking to men and women in a rich variety of circumstances. God is presented to us not in ideas and arguments but in events and actions that involve each of us personally. The signposts provide immediate and practical directions to guide us into behavior that is appropriate to our humanity in the particular place and time in which we live, and that is honoring to God.

The artless simplicity of the storytelling and signposting in these books makes what is written here as accessible to children as to adults, but the simplicity (as in so many simple things) is also profound, inviting us into a lifetime of growing participation in God's saving ways with us.

Preaching requires that we develop a Moses imagination, with stories and signposts. Using the name of Moses to identify these books does not mean he wrote them, for many unnamed Hebrew prophetic minds told and wrote what was eventually gathered and copied here. Moses, rather, represents the way of life and the way of using language that sets the tone for everything else that makes up Holy Scripture. The five books are foundational for the subsequent sixty-one. Preaching

in the company of Moses keeps proclamation personal and local while at the same time breathing the clean air of creation (what God does) and the air of covenant (how God brings us into participation).

Moses is mentioned in the New Testament more frequently than any other Old Testament person—seventy-eight times. His influence is everywhere. It is impossible to exaggerate his importance. A giant in the land. The first Christians (and preachers!), living by faith in Jesus Christ and teaching others to do the same, had Moses constantly on their tongues and his example always in their vision.

Elie Wiesel, retelling the Moses story with a blend of biblical and Talmudic materials, wrote, “Moses [was] the most solitary and most powerful hero in Biblical history. The immensity of his task and the scope of his experience command our admiration, our reverence, our awe. Moses, the man who changed the course of history . . . his emergence became the decisive turning point. After him, nothing was the same again.”<sup>4</sup>

The way of language in which Moses is our first teacher is most accurately described, I think, as a storytelling language, a language textured by the give-and-take of a life under the formative influence of God’s Word, language that develops in a worshipping congregation, language that invokes God and then listens and prays. It is the language of a mixed company of struggling sinners and faltering saints, preachers and teachers, homemakers and business people—people on pilgrimage, telling their family stories, passing on the counsels and promises of God. Preaching in the company of Moses develops precisely this storytelling imagination that keeps our sermons grounded in the everyday realities of the people to whom we are preaching.



But during the last three hundred years, the name of Moses, so long identified with the Five Books, the Torah, has for many been gradually effaced from the spine of his books, much as names disappear from centuries-old, weather-scoured cemetery markers. In this case the weather did not consist of wind and rain, snow and sleet, but of historical criticism, a new way of reading the Bible.

So for many of our pastor colleagues, the long practice of reading the Bible as a

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4. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Touchstone, 1976), 181.

book of faith has played second fiddle to reading it strictly as history. The *story*—the narrative of a lived faith in God—has been obscured if not lost altogether. Those who read the Bible this way (but not all) ignore the literary context of the Bible and take it apart, looking for development and historical change. They challenge the historicity of foundational events and traditional ideas of authorship and then reconstruct the history, but they leave the Bible itself as a pile of disjointed fragments from various times and places. They have no interest in the literary and theological coherence of the text. These critics suppose that by digging underneath the Moses books they can serve us a better or truer truth. But most writers are highly offended when people get more interested in the contents of their wastebaskets and filing cabinets than the books they write. “Read the book!” The meaning is in the book, not in the information about the book.

When I was twelve years old, in the year 1944, my father bought a disreputable ’36 Plymouth, drove it home, and parked it in the alley behind our house. There it died. It never ran again. I don’t think my father ever went out back and looked at it again. But I put it to good use. I was a couple of years away from getting my driver’s license, and I sat in that old wreck most days for an hour after school and practiced using the gear shift, shifting from first to second to third and back down again, using the brake and clutch pedals, positioning my hands on the steering wheel, imagining myself in the act of driving over mountain roads and through blizzards.

After a few months I had mastered the moves. But having used up my imagination in driving the inert machine, I thought I might as well try to find out what made it tick when it did tick. I think I had a vague idea that maybe I could make it run again. I took it apart, piece by piece, educating myself in the ways of carburetors, cooling systems, transmissions, and brake drums. After a few months I was familiar with most of the parts now laid out on the grass, but I never did figure out what made it run. And of course by the time I had completed my investigative work, there was no chance of it ever running again.



Is it possible to appreciate the work of the historical critics that in large part (not completely) removes Moses as the author of the Five Books and yet at the same time affirms the traditional Mosaic presence that has provided a cohesive and personal

authorial voice, the story line that has kept all the parts together for both Jews and Christians for so long? Is it possible to take the Torah apart historically and then put it back together again as a book of faith with theological and literary integrity? I think it is. It is not only possible but worth any effort it might take. And pastors occupy an influential place in the Christian church from which to do it.

The world that we read of in our Bibles was essentially an oral world, although there is plenty of evidence that much of the speaking also got written. Language in itself, in its origins and in most of its practice, is oral. We *speak* words long before we write and read them. The world we live in today continues to be primarily oral. Orality does not mean primitive. Words spoken are both previous to and inherently superior to words written, even in the most literate of cultures.

Among our Hebrew ancestors, generations of orally transmitted traditions developed and seasoned their unique people-of-God memory. Here and there, now and then, the words were written down and preserved, copied and collected, honored and read. Moses is remembered as one who wrote down the words (Exodus 24:4; 34:27–28; Deuteronomy 31:9, 24). The words became books. In all that was said or sung or written, the memory and words of Moses provided the story line that kept it all together. Over time, the telling and the writing became the Five Books of Moses.



Moses's presence was profound: his leadership, his integrity, his ordained authority as the leader of the people of God out of the slavery of Egyptian bondage into the service of God, his Sinai transmission of God's revelation, his provision and instruction for recentering the life of the people in worship. His pastoral care of his flock during all those years in the wilderness shaped all the seemingly disparate stories, instructions, and directions into a coherent whole. Moses looms still as the architect of the huge, sprawling house of language that is the Torah, the Five Books, the founding document for the faith of Israel and the Christian gospel. Torah: the revelation of God written for the people of God, Jew and Christian alike. Not just *author* in a strictly literal sense, but *authority* in an encompassing literary and Spirit-inspired sense.

Jesus, who confined his language to the spoken word, and those who wrote his story for us commonly referred to the Torah (“the Law”) simply as “Moses.” In the

early church Moses was the most prominent ancestral name, whether as leader of the people of God or as the one giving voice to the revelation of God in the Torah. *Torah* and *Moses* were virtual synonyms in both Judaism and the church.

As we preach in the company of Moses, we will nourish this storytelling imagination.

# “In the Beginning God Created”

GENESIS 1:1–2:4

JOHN 1:1–3

A little more than a year ago, three men were orbiting the moon in a space capsule. It was Christmas Eve, and they took turns reading Genesis 1, the opening chapter of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” a most magnificent choice of texts for Christmas Eve.

The *Apollo 8* spacecraft was transformed momentarily into a Jewish/Christian pulpit. Man’s most impressive technological achievement to date was absorbed in the declaration of God’s creative act. Apollo, the most dashing of the pagan Greek gods, bowed down in worship to “God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.”<sup>5</sup> The astronauts did what a lot of people spontaneously do when they integrate an alert mind with a reverent heart—they worshiped.

One person objected stridently. The self-proclaimed atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair noisily complained that the nation’s space program had been hijacked to advance a minority religion. She said that the tax money of millions had been used to propagate the Christian faith of a few, violating the rights of the atheists. The wealth of a nation had been put in the service of a Christian witness. The conscience of the atheist was offended.<sup>6</sup>

She was, of course, right. It *was* unfair. You might even say it was shocking. We have gotten used to listening in on the conversations between Mission Control in

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5. Apostles’ Creed, [www.umc.org/what-we-believe/apostles-creed-traditional-ecumenical](http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/apostles-creed-traditional-ecumenical).

6. “People and Ideas: Madalyn Murray O’Hair,” PBS, [www.pbs.org/godinamerica/people/madalyn-murray-ohair.html](http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/people/madalyn-murray-ohair.html).



Houston and astronauts orbiting the earth and moon. It is a highly technical conversation using an unambiguous mathematical-scientific vocabulary. We have learned to admire the cool, unflappable consistency of the men who sit at the controls of the complex, intricate mechanisms of space travel. We are occasionally reminded that they are human by a boyish burst of enthusiasm over the view of Earth wrapped in beauty. We are even reminded once in a while that they are sinners as tempers flare or profanity slips out. We reassure ourselves, by reading interviews with their spouses and looking at pictures of their homes, that they are really humans much like we are. But that is only the diverting, anecdotal background to the big picture. The astronauts represent modern man at his scientific apogee, superbly in control, precisely trained, dominating the world with power and skill.

When these men without warning recite an ancient confession of faith, when these men openly admit they are not just the conquerors of space but at the same time worshippers of God, well, it *is* unusual. Mrs. O'Hair did well to be angry.

The fact is that the space capsule is an educational center. Millions of persons were watching images of it on TV and listening to radio transmissions of the conversations. What the astronauts said had enormous coverage and intense impact. It was one of the educational highlights in human history. The world became a classroom. An appropriate passage from Heisenberg or Einstein would be heard and repeated all over the world and through repetition would be indelibly impressed on the minds of millions.

But this text was from millennially old Genesis. Would there be laments over the wasted educational opportunity for science? Would anyone feel that this was a painful opening of old wounds? For a long period of time there had been bitter controversy between Genesis and geology, Eden and evolution. Battle lines had formed. The defenders of God used their Bibles instead of bullets. The defenders of Darwin stockpiled weapons in the form of fragments of jawbones and stratified rocks. One group looked to the Garden of Eden for the beginnings of creation; the other group was convinced you could learn far more by exploring the Galápagos Islands. Neither group seemed to be paying much attention to the other. But in recent years at least a kind of coexistence has been settled on. There aren't so many arguments. But neither are there many conversations. Each group now goes its own way, one reading Genesis, the other reading scientific journals. Would reading Genesis from the space capsule awaken the sleeping dogs of the old science-religion controversy?

It was one of those rare times when virtually everyone heard Scripture read accurately. The Bible was read at a highly dramatic moment in the history of humankind, and everyone had a stake in the event. They heard it as a word of God, a declaration of faith, an announcement about God in his action as Creator. And the evidence that the word was heard rightly is that the scientifically trained astronauts were not threatened by it and the atheist was.

Since the days of Galileo, Genesis 1 has been controversial. But the controversy is not between science and faith, not between the person who reads Darwin and the one who reads Calvin. Whenever the controversy has been conducted along those lines, it has been the wrong battle, like two brothers fighting over a woman they find out is their sister.



I grew up in a church culture that thrived on conflict. We were a small sectarian congregation and existed on the margins of what we understood as “the world”—people who didn’t believe in God or who didn’t believe in God the way we understood him. Or they didn’t read Scripture the way we did.

I more or less took it for granted that my schoolmates were unsaved and that it was my Jesus assignment to witness to and pray for them. I had absorbed many taboos that separated me from my friends: no vulgar or obscene language, no movies, no dancing. By the time I entered adolescence, a “great chasm” (Luke 16:26, NASB)—the same that separated the rich man Dives in Hades from the beggar Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom—had developed between me and my schoolmates.

Itinerant evangelists who frequently visited our little flock warned us of the dangers around us. By the time I entered high school, I was repeatedly warned of the godless evolution that was being taught by my biology teacher, Mr. Ryder, whom I rather liked but who also, I soon realized, put me in particular peril. I had no idea that twenty-five years earlier a high school biology teacher in Tennessee, John Scopes, had been arrested, put on trial, and convicted for teaching the same things. I boldly compensated for my marginal status in class discussions by pitting texts from Genesis against my teacher’s citations from Darwin. Differences of opinion gradually developed into arguments with my classmates and soon degenerated into mean-spirited invective. I loved using the Bible to pick fights with evolutionists and atheists.

As the years passed, I found I rather liked having an enemy. It sharpened my sense of identity. The visiting evangelists gave me plenty of enemies to oppose—liberals, Catholics, Calvinists, evolutionists, environmentalists, Democrats, communists—exposing some of them as a front for the Antichrist.



As I edged into adulthood, I began meeting and reading the writings of Christian friends who loved science, some of them scientists themselves. Like so many of you in this congregation, they seemed to have no trouble integrating their Christian faith with the findings of science. I remember one friend telling me several months ago that science and religion are opposites, the way your thumb and forefinger are opposites: if you are going to get a grip on things, you need them both.

And then—I had wasted a lot of time by now—I began learning to read Genesis on its own terms and discovered it was a stunning piece of theological art, a beautiful evocation of this created world and the God who created it.

I came to realize that this first page in the Bible was a masterful preparation for shaping an imagination capable of entering what Karl Barth has called this “strange new world within the Bible”<sup>7</sup>—slowly, quietly, reverently. I set aside what I had been so vehemently arguing in my ignorant adolescent certainties and let God speak his presence and reality to me. I was gradually learning to let God tell me who he is and the way he works.

I decided to quit trying to prove God to others and instead started listening to God speak to me, not making pronouncements on God but listening, listening, listening. Instead of searching Scripture for truths I could use to bully or impress my friends, I would take my place alongside them in this God-Creation and enter into what God was creating in me and around me.

And I would not be in a hurry. There is a leisurely quality to this first page of Genesis, a lot of repetition—God as subject (thirty-five times), God in action (*created, said, made, called, saw, set, blessed, finished, rested, let there be, and it was so*). And then the verdict, the final stamp of approval placed on every item of creation: *good* (eight times) and the final *good* given the emphasis *very good*.

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7. Quoted in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1975), 101.

The numbered days, one through seven, provide a rhythmic, ordered structure: everything in order, nothing haphazard, nothing unintentional.



The Genesis week is a workweek. God creates. God is not described as a force, an energy, an idea, a principle, an abstraction. He simply goes to work.

But this seventh day gets an emphasis all its own. The six workdays are simply cited by number. The concluding day is repeated three times: “On the *seventh day* God finished his work . . . he rested on the *seventh day* . . . God blessed the *seventh day*” (Genesis 2:2–3). And then a new verb is introduced: “God . . . *hallowed* it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation” (verse 3).

Where have you heard that verb before? Right. In the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. The first petition in the prayer is “Hallowed be thy name” (Matthew 6:9). Or, “Let your name be recognized as holy.” In English we don’t have a verb for *holy*. *Hallowed* is not part of our everyday speech. So it is more like “Let your name be revered.”

The seventh day, set apart for being reverent before God, being quiet and receptive before God as we take in all that God has done across the spectrum of creation—light; earth and sea; sun, moon, and stars; fish and birds; animals of all kinds; and, the crown of creation, man and woman. We are living an existence teeming with life, and we are an integral part of that life.

And then this: Moses, after God had rescued his people from a life of slavery in Egypt and then gathered them at Mount Sinai, gave them a charter to guide them in their new life of freedom, the Ten Commandments. The fourth of those commandments is lifted from Genesis: “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). Use this day to take into account all that God has done for you. Take nothing for granted. And do it every week. Forty years later Moses preached his final sermon to his congregation on the plains of Moab. As they prepared to enter the Holy Land, he repeated these ten commandments, which were to define the way they lived in the life of creation and salvation. The fourth is there intact, newly minted from Genesis: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Deuteronomy 5:12, HCSB).

I love picturing the first sermon Moses preached from Mount Sinai now joining everything God did in Genesis with the way they are to live that everything,

now bookended with the final sermon Moses preached from the plains of Moab, emphasizing the Genesis connection to the way they were to continue to live in the new land of Canaan: *Remember*. One day a week stop what you are doing and pay attention to what God has been doing and is doing. Be reverent and worshipful and grateful for the Genesis world we are placed in. Remember in gratitude and worshipful adoration. Hallow this day. Keep this day holy.



In the course of being your pastor, I have come to think of the first page of Genesis as a launching pad for shaping an obedient and reverent life of following Jesus in our daily, ordinary, working, and worshiping lives. I don't know if any of you will remember this, but a few years ago I came across some words in a sermon about Jerusalem preached by Isaiah to his congregation of exiles in Babylon that seemed to me to be written just for us. I told you about them then. But the longer I am your pastor the more important they have become. What I mentioned to you then was that the cultural and spiritual conditions in which we are living as pastor and people in America strike me as being very much like the exile conditions of the Hebrews in Babylon: the pervasive uprootedness and loss of place (only three or four families in our congregation were born in this county), the loss of connection with a tradition of worship (only a few of you were raised as Presbyterians), the sense of being immersed in a foreign and idolatrous society (in contemporary America there is very little moral consensus, no common memory, and most of us are far removed from where we grew up).

But what I have more recently noticed is that the words *create*, *created*, and *Creator* occur more times in the exilic preaching of Isaiah than any other place in the Bible: sixteen times, as compared to the six occurrences of *created* in the great creation narrative of Genesis 1–2.

Under Isaiah's influence, as I move from this pulpit to hospital rooms and family rooms, coffee shops and community gatherings, praying with and listening to bored or devastated men and women, the word *create* has emerged out of the background of what happened long ago in Canaan and Egypt and Babylon into prominence right here—an actively gospel word announcing what God is doing today among the exile people, which is us.

*Create* is a word used in the Bible exclusively with God as the subject. Men and

women don't, *can't*, create. But God does. When nothing we can do makes any difference and we are left standing around empty handed and clueless, we are ready to notice what God is creating, not just "in the beginning," but now, today. When the conditions in which we live seem totally alien to life and salvation, we start looking around at what God is doing.

And that is where the seventh day of creation comes in. When God finished the work of creation (*finished* is used twice in as many verses), he "rested" (also used twice). Is that why we are twice commanded (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) to "Keep the Sabbath holy"? I think so. We are keeping company with God in the present, in the *now*: attending, adoring.

Doesn't it look very much as if Genesis points to the seventh day as the clue to the meaning of creation? There is far more to creation than *creation then*. There is *creation now*. The evidence accumulates that if we are to live out the reality and meaning of creation, we are going to be inextricably involved with Sabbath keeping. If Genesis is a text for getting us in on and participating in God's creation work, Sabbath is our point of entry.

Amen.

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