

GENESIS 1:26-31
WE ENTER THE STORY

One of the games my wife and I like to play is, “Who does he look like? Who does she look like?” Maybe we are in a restaurant, and we are looking at our server. Or maybe we are driving along the road, and we are looking at a billboard. Or maybe we are with people in the church or the community, and we are looking at someone we have just met. One of us will say, “Who does he look like?” or “Who does she look like?”

The game is interesting, because more often than not, we disagree. She might say, “She looks like that friend from college.” And I will say, “You’ve got to be kidding.” Or I will say, “He looks like that guy from our church in Minnesota.” And she will say, “No way.” Or she will say, “He looks like that famous actor.” And I will say, “Well, more than I do.”

Do you ever play that game? We can play that game because we are both like each other and unlike each other. As people, we sometimes bear a resemblance to other people, but unless you are an identical twin, you do not look exactly like another person. Even with identical twins, you can usually see differences as they grow older!

This year, we are journeying through the story of this world and the story of our lives. The first part of the story is creation. In Genesis 1, we have discovered the glories of our personal, purposeful, powerful God, and the wonders of his creation, where we see both order and variety. Now we reach the creation of man and woman. We discover the heart of this description when we read the words “image” and “likeness.” These two words express this truth: we are like God, and we are unlike God. Today, we will discover a likeness that exalts us, and an unlikeness that humbles us, as we live in this story.

Let’s start with the part that exalts us. In a real way, these words mean **WE ARE EXALTED**. They do not mean we are worthy of worship, but they do remind us that in some ways, *WE ARE LIKE GOD*. How are we like God? We are personal, and we are relational.

We are personal. Already in the creation story, we have seen the three Persons of God. We have discovered the Father leading the creation, the Son participating in the creation, and the Holy Spirit hovering in the creation. Now these three Persons, after creating the land, sea and sky and the creatures who will live in those places, create more persons. Humans will be male and female, and they will be made to make more persons.

What does it mean to be personal? It means we have an awareness of our existence. We know we are, we know we are here, and we know we are, and we are here, with others. We can see ourselves, and we can see outside ourselves. We can feel and think. We can love and hate. We can laugh and cry. We can gain and lose. We have a level of consciousness that is unique in the creation. Rocks are not personal. Animals have great instincts and some intelligence, but they do not have the same personal awareness that we have. Like God, we are personal.

We are personal, and we are relational. Because we are personal, we can relate to God and each other in a way that is unique in the creation. We do not live here alone, and we do not and cannot act as if we live here alone. We are made to live in relationship with other people. There is a sense in which we can relate to animals, but such relationships can never have the depth of our relationships with each other.

I am reading a book about the life of Ronald Reagan. His wife Nancy was his second wife. He was first married to the actress Jane Wyman, and he was devastated by his divorce. As he wrote about the days after the divorce, he recalled, “My loneliness was not from being unloved, but rather from not loving.” We may think we are unloved, and be lonely. Or we may fail to love, and be lonely. We are this way, because we are made to love. Just as the three Persons in the Trinity have a loving relationship, we are made for loving relationship. We are relational.

If we are personal and relational, this means we can glorify God in a unique way. All of the creation declares the glory of God, but as persons who live and love together, we deeply reflect the personality and

relationality of God.

SO WE ARE EXALTED. Maybe you have heard Christians describe human beings as the “pinnacle” of creation, or the “apex” of creation, or the “height” of creation. That is true, but we have to be sure that we do not worship people, and that we do not use our uniqueness as an excuse to abuse the rest of creation. Yet in a real way, our uniqueness does exalt us. It means we are valuable to our Creator - and that importance changes our story. How? We could spend the rest of the day on this, but I want to mention just a few cultural and personal issues for us.

The first issue is a prominent subject in January: civil rights. Like so many other cultural issues, we tend to think politically about this. We wonder, what do Republicans and Democrats believe about this issue or that legislation? We may disagree on details, but God’s people need to say, “Because we are made in the image of God, every person is valuable and should receive respectful treatment.” Racism, whether it targets Native Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics, or any other group, is a sin before the God who made those people in his image.

The next issue should also be a prominent subject in January: the sanctity of human life. This includes abortion, as pro-life groups recall and regret the “Roe vs. Wade” decision that struck down state restrictions on abortion. Yet this includes a number of other issues - like care for people with special needs, end-of-life issues for the injured and elderly, and who should make the decisions about all of these issues. Once again, we can talk politics, but our thinking should be rooted in our belief in the value of life. In the womb, that is human life, made in the image of God. In a wheelchair, that is human life, made in the image of God. On a bed that will be a bed of death, that is human life, made in the image of God. Even as we wrestle with hard personal and political questions surrounding these issues, we must value and protect life.

We must remember this, even as we debate a very divisive issue today: the President’s health care plan. Once again, we will have our political positions on this. But if people are made in the image of God, we should be concerned about this issue. We should want people to receive good health care, because they are made in the image of God. You may or may not like how the President and the majority of Congress are proposing to address health care issues. Personally, I don’t. But we should face this issue with a desire to value human life, as God does.

Living in Richmond and looking at Haiti, we face another issue: compassion. We see people struggling in our community. We see people suffering in our world. What is our response? We might become cynical and say, “It’s their fault.” We might become indifferent and say, “It’s not my problem.” Indeed, we cannot do everything, and there are times when we should do nothing. But how do we see people? How do we speak of people? Is there compassion in my heart, because I know these people are made in the image of God?

Yet our likeness to God is also a very personal issue. As I think about my life and your lives, I believe the issue is often this: how do I treat people? How do I think about that hard-to-love person? How do I relate to that person whose heart and life are repulsive to me? How do I respond to that person who irritates me? How do I speak to the person who nags me? How do I love the person who can do me absolutely no good? Jesus said that we all love people who love us. But what about your enemy? He or she is still made in the image of God. Do you treat people as truly made in the image of God? What would they say?

It all starts here. If you believe people are the product of random evolutionary chance, and if you think people are just another form of animals, your words and life will reflect that. When we reduce people to a collection of atoms or a cousin of monkeys, we hurt them and dishonor God. But when we remember that God made us like him - as personal, relational beings - we do not worship people, but we exalt the people around us as valuable creatures. Do you? Do I?

Made in the image and likeness of God, we are exalted. But as well, **WE ARE HUMBLLED.** We are like God. But these verses also reveal that *WE ARE NOT LIKE GOD.* Why not? Because we can’t do what he does, and because we must do what he says.

We can’t do what he does. This may seem obvious, but it is good to be reminded of this. He is the

Creator, and we are the creatures. We only have life, because he has given us life. In verses 29 and 30, we read of how God gives the man and woman the plants and trees for food. We did not create ourselves, and we do not provide for ourselves.

We forget this. In our culture, we surround ourselves with ornaments of our pride. We have our neat houses. We have our nice cars. We have our stylish clothes. We have our cool gadgets. We call them our “status symbols.” They represent how great we think we are. Houses, cars and clothes are necessary, and gadgets are useful. But when we display them and use them with pride, we neglect this truth - that all we have, and all we are, and all we ever hope to be, is from our creator God. We may expect people who don’t know or acknowledge God to do this. But what about those of us who say we believe in God?

We can’t do what he does. We should be aware of our incredible smallness and his amazing greatness. If that is true, then this is true: We must do what he says.

We will see this more in the next chapter, but notice what God does after he creates man and woman. He gives them commands. We find two basic commands here: the command to be fruitful and increase in number, and the command to rule over the creation. We could talk about all the details of those commands, but instead, I just want you to notice that they are commands. They remind us that our story is not just our story. God gives people great blessings and great freedom. But he also gives people great responsibility, and he holds them accountable for what they do with their freedom.

Our family loves to watch reruns of the “Cosby Show.” A while back, I read some words from Bill Cosby that described some of the thinking behind the stories in that show. Cosby said that in every single episode, one theme was always present: the parents are in charge. Denise wants to go to Africa. Only after they learn the details. Vanessa wants to date this boy. Only if they meet him. Theo wants to coast through school. Not in our house. Rudy wants to play football. Only when they give permission. They are in charge.

God is in charge. Let’s say it this way: as creatures made in the image of God, we are not just personal and relational. We are moral. We can do right and wrong, and we live before One who knows and notices when we do right and wrong, and calls us to account for it. If you know the rest of the story, you know the story of man and woman is the story of people trying to break free from the commands of God. But here at the beginning, in the first scene of the story, we discover a God who creates, who cares about what he creates, and who commands what he creates.

SO WE ARE HUMBLLED. We did not create ourselves, so we have no right to say, “I will do whatever I want!” We are created by a moral God, who calls us to moral responsibility. We are not on our own, and we are not our own.

Are you here this morning, and you do not profess faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? I am glad you are here, and I hope you are blessed. But these words challenge you.

Maybe you think you are fully free. Maybe you think you can do whatever you want, and you believe either God must not, can not, or will not call you to a day of judgment for it. But you are created by a God who is intensely interested in all you are, and in all you do. You are created by a God who is immensely holy, and whose character reflects a holy love for what is right, and a holy hatred for what is wrong.

Maybe you know God is there, but you are sure you are good enough for him. As we might say to ourselves about ourselves, “What’s not to like?” But you are not the judge - God is. Have you truly and fully obeyed his commands? We have two here, and there are others. We fool ourselves when we presume that we have obeyed as we should. From the moment he makes man and woman, he commands his image-bearers and holds them accountable.

Are you here this morning, and you do profess faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? If so, I am glad, and I hope you are blessed, too. But the story of the creation is also a challenge to you, because you may sit here this morning and think you are free to live for yourself.

In our culture, we have a lot of people who have professed faith in Jesus Christ. They have prayed a prayer. They have walked an aisle. They have agreed to what some pastor said - a day or a year or a decade or

more ago. But the expression of the lips does not reflect a true profession of the heart, for if your heart is truly given to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you will long to live for your creating and redeeming God.

Is there anything more destructive to the God's gospel and God's kingdom than this? We say we believe, but we believe that because we have said that, we can do anything we want. So we name the name of Jesus, and we continue to believe other faiths are okay. Or we name the name of Jesus, and we treat our employees like animals. Or we name the name of Jesus, and we are unfaithful to the promises we have made in our marriage. Or we name the name of Jesus, and we cheat the government. We do all of this and more, and we do not turn from this in repentance. We name the name of Jesus, and we think we can follow all of our desires and whims for all our days, and be fine with God, because we said something a day, a year or a decade or more ago.

The world calls this "hypocrisy." So does Jesus. The God who creates and redeems, calls his created people to trust in the redemption of Jesus, and once we have been redeemed, the God who creates and redeems calls his people to follow his commands. We do not achieve salvation by following God's commands. We receive salvation only through Jesus, who flawlessly followed God's commands for us. But a living faith changes life. The true Christian strives to follow God's commands. A redeemed creature, longs to honor his or her Creator.

Do you? Are you? Or are you holding on to your life, by holding on to your Lordship over your life? Maybe it is a stubborn heart attitude about everything in your life, where you want to follow your way, not God's commands. Or maybe it is a rebellious heart attitude about something in your life. You will follow God's commands in some ways, but not in this way.

At the start of the story, as we read the words that describe a creating, commanding God, I call you to the humility God demands. Maybe you are not a professing believer, and you need to humble yourself for the first time. Or maybe you are a professing believer, but you still need to humble yourself before your creating and commanding God. Does he not have the right to call you to this, because of his creating grace and his redeeming grace? He made you. He redeems you through Jesus. How can he not reign in your heart and life? How can you not be busy in the daily business of putting off the life that he hates, and putting on the life that he loves?

The story is told of Michael Jordan, from the days of his glorious domination of professional basketball. He was going to dinner with a friend, and he needed to borrow a jacket from his friend. He entered his friend's closet, where he saw clothes from Jordan's sponsor, Nike, and clothes from another sponsor of another player. Jordan took the clothes from the other sponsor, threw them on the floor in the living room, and cut them to shreds. He turned to his friend and said, "You can't ride the fence."

You are made in the image of God. You are personal and relational, exalted above the rest of the creation. But the very God who exalts you, humbles you and calls you to a loyalty to him in all of your life. Jesus Christ has come to forgive the sins of creatures like you and me, and now he calls you to follow him. You cannot call Jesus "Lord" and live as your own master. You cannot ride the fence. Either you are your own, or you are his - from the moment of your creation, to the moments of eternity. Rejoice in how valuable you are, and humble yourself before the One who gives you all you are, all you have, and all you ever hope to be.