

TEXTS: Genesis 1:1-2:4; Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 12:1-2; Mark 4:1-9  
THEME: You are priests of creation  
SUBJECT: Understanding what it means to be human  
TITLE: Robot, Super Hero, Priest

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Messiah Moravian  
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We live by stories. Different stories compete for our allegiance. Which story we live forms and shapes our identity, our relationships with others and our relationship with God.

A modern story, a popular story, at least in some circles, declares freedom an illusion, the mind a byproduct of metabolism, consciousness reducible to merely physical causes. The cosmos, the earth, we—only matter, matter only. This is the story of materialism as a philosophy.

It seems that, as David Bentley Hart puts it, every aspiring young materialist dreams of growing up to be a robot. In the end, if reality is matter only all the way down, it doesn't matter—nothing matters. This story, Hart concludes, was the most catastrophic event in humanity's spiritual history.

An older story, a very old story, Gnosticism, believes being a creature is not good enough. Being finite, limited, susceptible to sleep, needing rest and food—these things are bad, weak, sinful perhaps. To please God one must reach beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary.

The Gnostics were a small group of Christians who considered themselves to be superChristians, and were impatient with normal life for its lack of obvious spiritual refinement. Daily life, and creation along with it, was to be transcended in favor of personal knowledge (gnosis) of God, shared with an elite group of “spiritually deep” friends. In the end, what mattered was transcending the limits of matter.

The secular version of Gnosticism's story is the story of celebrity culture. Fame is secularism's version of spiritual enlightenment. “Wonder Woman” may have left many wondering why anyone would want to watch celebrities warbling along with a 50-year-old-song (“Imagine”) calling for unity from their enormous mansions. The tone deaf feat made Amanda Hess, in the New York Times, ask if one of the consequences of the pandemic was the “swift dismantling of the cult of celebrity?”

Not to worry, says Professor Chris Rojek, City University, London. “We've had over a hundred years of celebrity culture.” The pandemic appears to have shifted who we deem worthy of recognition back towards those people with something real to offer, but perhaps this is only a virtuous blip. The limelight of stardom may have been dimmed this year but it is likely only a temporary flicker: celebrity culture is here to stay. In the end, what matters is matter, more matter, the most matter.

Genesis offers an alternative story. It portrays a garden, Eden, as a place of communion. God's gift to humanity is the space to be itself, to be a creature of God, not a robot, not a super hero, but

a creature. In this creation story, to be a creature is the highest honor. Humanity was created in the image of God. We are not God; we are created with limitations but these are pronounced “good,” “very good.”

In the Hebrew narrative, it is clear that Adam and Eve’s only “superpower” was trust in God’s word. They were limited. Limitation was written into their perfection. Their humanity was not a problem for God, or something he put up with. It was their greatest gift. Grasping after the fruit was an attempt to be superhuman. It was, at root, ingratitude for being made creatures.

Our very limitations imply the need for relationship. We are created to know ourselves in relationship with others and with God. We cannot survive let alone thrive apart from interdependence. In the end, what matters is communion, community.

If we lived in ancient Mesopotamia and we heard the Hebrew creation story, we would immediately recognize what the author of Genesis was trying to do. Genesis 1-3 is overflowing with Egyptian literary devices that everyone—Hebrew and Egyptian—would recognize as essential parts of the story. This shouldn’t surprise us. The Hebrews spent enough time in Egypt as slaves to be steeped in the cosmology of Egyptian gods and goddesses.

Moses was faced with a monumental task. The Hebrew slaves not only needed to be freed from Pharaoh, but from Pharaoh’s story: humans were created by gods as slaves. Moses’ task was to re-story the Hebrew’s understanding of who they were, who God was, and what the world was meant to be.

Moses began with one of the fundamental building blocks of story-telling in ancient Mesopotamia—six days. What was always built in six days? Temples! (For details see: John Walton’s *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* or Ian Provan’s *Seriously Dangerous Religion: What the Old Testament Really Says and Why it Matters*.)

When Moses began numbering the days of creation, people knew exactly what was going on: God is building a temple. God’s temple is the earth. The earth takes on supreme significance as a place to worship God. Ordinary life on earth is temple life, worshipful. Everywhere is a place of communion with God (except maybe the golf course).

Adam and Eve are placed in the garden to “work and keep” it. This may sound to us like gardening, but an ancient Hebrew would immediately recognize the language as priestly. It turns up again in Numbers 3:7-8, where the Levites are told to “work and keep” the tabernacle. So, are Adam and Eve gardeners or priests? Is there a connection between the two? The early rabbis believed the first humans were intended to be priests of creation, tending God’s cosmic temple.

The instructions for building the tabernacle (Leviticus 3) parallel the language for creating the world, revealing both to be temple language. This repetition of the original wording of the story of creation would only help the Hebrew people understand Adam and Eve—and themselves in

their footsteps—as priests of the cosmos. For the Hebrew mind there is no division between secular and sacred. Human life and human flourishing are a form of worship, as they happen in God’s temple.

All life is spiritual. Work. Bearing children. Hobbies. Friendship. Repairing gutters. Commuting. This is our worship—the offering of our everyday stuff to God. As a modern paraphrase of Romans 12:1 has it, “Take your everyday, ordinary life . . . and place it before God as an offering.”

In the Genesis story we learn that we are neither robots nor super heroes, but priests serving in God’s temple, the earth, our home. If we believe the earth, and we, are matter only and only matter all the way down, then exploitation is the order of the day. If we believe the earth is God’s temple and we God’s priests, then stewardship is the order of the day.

In the end what matters is which story we live!

(This sermon is indebted to the works of Julie Canlis and David Bentley Hart.)

PRAYER: J. Philip Newell

Like light dappling through the leaves of a tree  
and wind stirring its branches,  
like birdsong sounding from the heights of an orchard  
and the scent of blossom after rainfall,  
so you dapple and sound in the human soul,  
so you stir into motion all that lives.

Let your graces of healing flow this day  
for my soul is wounded  
and there is brokenness in my life.

Let your graces of healing flow, dear God,  
for those whom I love are in need this day  
and there are agonies in the life of the world.

Bless our bodies and souls this day  
and renew us in the wisdom of creation  
that we may be changed for the healing of the world.