

Creation: God's First Incarnation

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 7, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Genesis 1:1–2:3](#) and [Psalm 8](#)

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For a long time, my emotional reaction to the first creation story, the one we heard today, was resistance. I knew it was not a scientifically accurate explanation of creation, and still, there are plenty of people treat it as *the* explanation of how creation happened, who treat it as science. At some level, I knew that the argument about the text was really an argument about the authority of scripture, and that it's really hard to convince someone who thinks the Bible is inerrant (without any errors) and to be taken literally that the creation stories are not news reports of how creation happened. It's even hard to convince someone who thinks the Bible is inerrant and to be taken literally that there are two different creation stories in the opening chapters of the Genesis – and there definitely are.

So, for a long time, I embraced avoidance as a way of dealing with the creation stories. My relationship with the creation stories in the opening chapters of Genesis is much better now for a number of factors.

The first came when I found language to talk about the *purpose* of the stories – that they are explorations of *why*, not *how*, creation happened. If you ask the creation stories *how* God created, you're going to get an inaccurate answer. On the other hand, if you ask the creation stories *why* God created, you'll get rich responses that will engage your rational and imaginative minds.

The second came when I started to hear this first creation story as poetry – and I'll talk about this for a bit in a moment.

The third is coming to a deeper understanding of a theological tradition that was often condemned by the imperial church – which is the primary focus of today's sermon.

If you read the first creation story too literally, you immediately run into a problem. Each stanza of the poem ends with a refrain, "And there was evening and there was morning, the ___th day." And while God has created light, calling it 'day,' and darkness, 'calling it night,' in that first "day" of creation, God hadn't created the sun or moon yet, so how could there be a "day" in the literal sense of word "day"?

Instead looking at it literally, pull back and look at it literarily and you'll notice the structure of the poem. On "day" one, God creates light and separates it from darkness. On "day" two, God separates the waters into waters above and waters below. It's as if God blows a bubble in the water, creating a dome to hold the waters above separate from the waters under the dome. On "day" three, God draws forth dry land and vegetation.

The pattern – light; waters and sky; land – gets repeated.

On "day" four, God creates objects that emit (or, we now know in the case of the moon, reflect) light – the sun, the moon, and the stars. On "day" five, God creates the creatures of the sea and the sky. On "day" six, God creates land animals (including humans).

When I see this structure, it's even easier to hear this story as poetry. And like many poems that contain truth, the truth of this poem is not on the surface. The truth lies more deeply within – within the story and within ourselves.

There are a couple troubling lines in the story – the ones that use “subdue” and “dominion.” “There was, and continues to be, in the Christian tradition a strong proprietary understanding of how humans are to relate to nature,” writes Lee Canipe.¹ According to historian Lynn White, unlike the more nature-friendly religions of Asia and Western pagan traditions, Christianity “not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that man exploit nature for his own needs.”² “According to this perspective, humans could and *should* use whatever resources they extracted from the planet as they saw fit. It was a God-given prerogative.”³

And, as Lee Canipe points out, “Until the late 1700s, the practical effects of this attitude on the environment were minimal. With the coming of the Industrial Revolution and the discovery that carbon-based natural resources – first wood, then fossil fuels – could power great engines of production and development, the full implications of this proprietary perspective were soon illustrated by the landscapes ravaged by coal miners and the rivers polluted by toxic waste.”⁴ And White grimly concludes, “we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.”⁵

This axiom is rooted in these two troubling verses that are translated as a call to humans to “subdue” the earth and to have “dominion” over it. While the Hebrew word translated “subdue” does have connotations of having power over,⁶ in this context there is also an element of caretaking. If you have authority over your land, that authority is ineffective if you don't care for it.

The Hebrew word translated “dominion” has even stronger connotations of having power over. *Radah*, the Hebrew word, is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures in relationship to military action dominating an enemy.⁷ At a time when the natural world could be seen as a threatening enemy – we call the wilderness “wild” for a reason – having dominion over it might have been a comforting hope.

Now I think we need to read the charge to have “dominion” over creation in the context of verse 26, where the poet says we are created in the image and likeness of God. We should relate to creation the way God relates to creation. And, again, according to the

¹ Lee Canipe, “Rethinking ‘Dominion’ in Genesis 1:27-28,” *Christian Ethics Today*, <https://christianethicstoday.com/wp/rethinking-dominion-in-genesis-127-28/> (posted 27 December 2010, accessed 6 June 2026).

² Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” <https://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/courses/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>, page 4 (accessed 6 June 2026). The article was written in 1967, so the gender-exclusive language is not surprising. However, because the view White writes about is *so* connected to patriarchy, his exclusive language seems appropriate to me.

³ Canipe, *op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ White, *op. cit.*

⁶ See <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/kabash.html>.

⁷ Canipe, *op. cit.*

poet, God sees creation as something that is good, indeed very good, not as an enemy to be dominated.

The idea of seeing creation as something that is very good and seeing ourselves as caregivers, rather than takers who dominate the created world, is not a new one to Christianity. Irenaeus (who was born sometime before 155 and who died sometime after 190) taught that everything is *created out of the substance of God*.⁸ “He was concerned about a teaching that was gaining ground in second-century Christianity later known as *creatio ex nihilo*, ‘creation out of nothing.’ It taught the distant Creator, purely transcendent, had fashioned matter out of nothing.”⁹

Think about the implications of what Irenaeus taught for a moment. If every thing is created out of the substance of God, then every thing is holy. “How the body of another is handled in relationship, how the physical needs of those who are hungry and homeless are responded to, and how the body of the earth and its resources are treated – all these are holy matters.”¹⁰

The idea that God created all that is from nothing didn’t become a doctrine of the church until the 4th century, when Christianity became an imperial religion. Empire would much rather have us believing that everything is created from nothingness because it means that matter is neutral and therefore can be used – including the matter that is a human body – for whatever purpose the empire decrees. Matter isn’t sacred anymore. No wonder the Christianity that became part of the Roman Empire suppressed this early Christian idea that all matter is made from the substance of God.

A couple hundred years later, monk from Wales named Pelagius (360-420) taught the sacredness of us humans. He taught that “What is deepest in us is of God. Every child, every woman, every man, and every life-form is in essence divine.”¹¹

Pelagius believed “that when we look into the face of a newborn, we are looking into the face of God freshly born among us. Pelagius was not speaking merely of the newborn child. He was speaking also of what is deepest in every human being. He was enunciating the ‘dignity’ of our human nature, as he put it, not the defilement of our nature [which the doctrine of original sin held]. He was emphasizing our sacredness over our sinfulness. This ... did not mean Pelagius was naive about humanity’s capacity for falseness. Rather, he was teaching that what is deepest in us is *of* God, not *opposed* to God. It is this, he said, that we can clearly see in the face of a newborn child.”¹²

Fast forward another 400 years and we find John Scotus Eriugena (815-877). “Eriugena’s vision was not so much a theology as a cosmology of the sacred. God, he said, is the ‘essence of all things.’ For Eriugena, the light of the divine is like a subterranean river flowing through the body of the earth and of everything that has being.... God is the flow of life deep in all things. Everything, he said, is essentially a ‘theophany,’ a showing of the

⁸ John Philip Newell, in a lecture I heard on 15 February 2020.

⁹ John Philip Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021), 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 23.

¹² *Ibid*, 32.

divine. We are 'gods,' he says, 'made from God.' The deeper we move in any created thing, the closer we come to the 'divine brilliance' from which all life flows."¹³

"Eriugena said that the whole of the natural world is like a sacred text – ... that there are two books through which God is speaking. First is the small book; physically little, this is the book of Holy Scripture. The second is the big book, the living text of the universe, which includes the great luminaries of the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars; the earth, sea, and sky; the creatures of all these realms; and the multiplicity of life forms that grow from the ground. We need to read both books, he says, the sacred text of scripture *and* the sacred text of the universe. If we read only the little book, we will miss the vastness and wildness of the utterance, everything vibrating with the sound of the divine. If we read only the big book, we are in danger of missing the intimacy of the voice, for the book of scripture calls us to faithfulness in relationship, including faithfulness to strangers, refugees, widows, and the poorest among us."¹⁴

While there are others I could talk about, we'll leap ahead a millennium and look at John Muir (1838-1914). "Every life form, he said, and every rock formation is 'throbbing' and 'pulsing' with the divine. Even the stars are being pulsed onward by 'the heart of God.'"¹⁵

"The earth, he said, is a divine 'incarnation.' Here, Muir uses a word that most of Western Christianity has reserved exclusively for Jesus. Muir applies it not just to Jesus, not even just to humanity and the creatures, but to the matter of earth itself. Even earth's geological formations, he says are 'heaven incarnate'; the rocks can be called 'instonations' of God. Everything is in essence spirit, incarnated in flesh, in leaves, in rocks. All these varied forms of matter 'are simply portions of God,' wrote Muir. They are all of 'the God essence.'"¹⁶

I can't help but wonder if this long thread of Christian thought, typically suppressed and condemned by the gatekeepers in the church, influenced Father Richard Rohr when he wrote much more recently, "When Christians hear the word 'incarnation,' most of us think about the birth of Jesus, who personally demonstrated God's radical unity with humanity. But I want to suggest that the first Incarnation was the moment described in Genesis 1, when God joined in unity with the physical universe and became the light inside of everything."¹⁷

Regardless of what influenced him, I agree with Rohr, that creation itself is the first incarnation of God. There is a reason so many people feel closest to God when they are in nature: because God is there, incarnate. As people of faith, as followers of Jesus, we need to be reading the big book of creation as closely and seriously and devotedly as the little book of scripture.

Amen.

¹³ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 88.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 149.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 151.

¹⁷ Richard Rohr, "The First Incarnation," *Center for Action and Contemplation*, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-first-incarnation/> (posted 21 December 2025; accessed 6 June 2026).