



ROSE
HILL
CHURCH

Genesis 1:24-2:3
The Story
The Beginning of Life As We Know Itⁱ

Rev. Brian North
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This morning we embark on a journey that I am really excited about, and if you're not already looking forward to this, I hope some of my excitement rubs off on each of you. A few days ago a fellow pastor here in Kirkland asked me what I was preaching on this Sunday, and I told him we were starting a new series called, "The Story." And his immediate response was: "Oh, the church I served in Colorado did that three or four years ago, and it was fantastic. You guys will be really blessed by it, and it will be great for your church." It was a real affirmation of what we're beginning today.

Essentially, "The Story" is a big-picture overview of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, about how God is working out his purposes for His creation, including for you. There's a story being told in Scripture – not a make-believe or fiction story, though a lot of people outside the Christian faith might like to tell us that it is. It's the story of God. It's the story of His work. It's the story of His grace. It's the story of His truth. It's the story of His love. It's the story of His people. It's a story that has twists and turns...that has surprises...that has second chances...that has victories, and defeats, and one final victory that has changed the course of history and can change the course of your life.

So, Although the story of the Bible is the story is God, and His pursuit of us, to bring us into relationship with Him. We're not left out or cast to the side or are an after thought to the story. **Your story and the story of God intersect, and overlap.** "Upper Story" = God's story. "Lower Story" – our story. The two overlap, like a circle coming down and overlapping the circle below it. Your story and God's story overlap. And I hope and pray that this theme comes through over the course of this series, and inspires each of us in our journey of faith: that God's story and your story can join together.

So today's Scripture passage comes from Genesis 1 and 2. Now, if you're reading "The Story" each week, or going through it in your small group or class, you'll quickly realize that each chapter in the book is comprised of Scripture – usually the better part of 8-10 chapters from the Bible. Where

significant pieces of Scripture are skipped over, a summary is given. So today's Scripture reading is just a small slice of chapter 1 from "The Story" though the sermon today will include most of that chapter. I won't likely be able to cover the entire chapter from the book most of the weeks...but today we come pretty close.

So the Bible begins with a theological statement about where everything that is comes from. It doesn't try to answer every question we might have about the Universe or the earth or human beings, and in fact the Biblical creation account generates its own questions. But: **Right from the beginning, it is clear that the major player in the story, the one who makes everything happen, is God.** Everything starts with God. The Universe cannot manifest itself into being. Creation cannot bring itself to fruition. A lifeless rock floating in space cannot give birth to life.

A couple weeks ago as I was doing some longer range sermon planning, I came across a blog devoted to self-help. One post was all about saying statements about yourself that you wish to be true, even if they aren't true right, now, with the idea that they will, in time, become true. So, if you want to be a millionaire, and aren't right now, he suggests saying, "I am wealthy." If you want good health or get rid of some pain or illness, he suggests saying, "I am healthy." At the end of the blog, he closes with, "So until next time, remember," and this would be a statement he encourages us to make, "I am a powerful manifestor." According to this blog, you and I are powerful manifestors, and by our own power, we can bring to fruition in our lives whatever we put our minds to.

Now, I understand the power of words...A pretty good chunk of what I do is writing and speaking words to (hopefully) inspire and encourage people. I understand the idea of giving yourself a pep talk before a big challenge. I think of the guy who's mom woke him up Sunday morning and did not want to go to church – no one liked him, the sermons were boring, and he just wanted to stay in bed that day. And the mom finally said, "You have to go to church: you're the pastor!" Sometimes we have to have a pep talk like that with ourselves, to get up and get going. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." That's a big lie, as we all know. So

words can be powerful. I get that.

But the story of Creation makes it clear that we cannot manifest ourselves, and on our own we cannot make ourselves truly good, or holy. We cannot speak things into being. We always fall short when we try to do it without our Creator. The opening chapters of Genesis make all of this clear. The universe did not manifest itself. The earth did not manifest itself. You did not manifest yourself. We cannot bring ourselves into being. And we cannot make ourselves holy – with Adam and Eve show us quite quickly when they stray from what God told them and try to do things on their own.

Then, their sons cannot manifest enough goodness and forgiveness to keep peace in the family, or to overcome jealousy, and Cain kills Abel. This continues and spreads and by the time you get to Genesis chapter 6, we read, **“The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that *every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time*” (Genesis 6:5, emphasis added).** I think we have to presume there’s a slight bit of hyperbole going on with this description of the human heart. But it certainly makes the point, right? God loves his creation, he especially loves the pinnacle of his creation – humans – who alone are created in His image...but in our free will, we’ve gotten sideways with God and with each other. Our thought life, and the actions that flow out of them, are not nearly as holy and pure as we’d like to pretend they are. In fact, they’re “only evil all the time.”

Some people wonder (I do, anyway): why did God give us free will? Why do we have the ability to think about things that aren’t true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable, as Scripture (Philippians 4:8) tells us to do? I think the obvious answer is that: **Free will is part of what it means to be created in the image of God.** God is not a robot, and therefore, neither are we. He wants a real relationship. Have you tried having a relationship with a robot? It’s kind of a one-way deal. That’s not what God wants. God isn’t forced to love us, and we aren’t forced to love Him. God loves us because he chooses to, and He gives us that same freedom to love Him back. This impacts the thoughts and the choices we make, and then our actions – how we live and treat others around us – then flow out of that.

And so if we're going to get out of life as we know it (every thought is evil) and back to how God intends it to be lived: it's our brains – our God-given, free-will brains – that need to be re-trained and re-programmed and aligned with God's vision and values for us as His creation. Now, I know that this Genesis 6 verse talks about the thoughts of the human heart, which was the Hebraic way of thinking. To us (Greek/Western thinking) and the writers of the New Testament: we associate our thoughts with our minds, not with our hearts.

And so that's why so many of the New Testament verses that focus on bringing about right behavior...that focus on getting us out of this rut of making wrong choices...that want to get us out of this "sin rut" that pulls us away from our Creator and away from our fellow image-bearers...so much of what the NT focuses on is our brains, or our minds. The mind is the key thing. God wants us to start there. And we see this in some famous words from Scripture like: "Take every thought captive" (2 Corinthians 10:5); "Have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16); "Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). And perhaps the best-known of them all, **"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"** (Romans 12:2).ⁱⁱ

And let me tell you, this is more deeply true than the writers of Scripture probably ever even realized. Let me just read to you a short scientific thing that makes this clear. "In 1949, Donald Hebb, a Canadian neuropsychologist, wrote what has become known as Hebb's axiom: 'Neurons (neurons are your nerve cells...the basic building blocks of your nervous system) that fire together wire together.'" What this means is that, "Each experience we encounter, whether a feeling, a thought, a sensation...is embedded in thousands of neurons that form a network. **Repeated experiences become increasingly embedded in this network, making it easier for the neurons to fire (respond to the experience), and more difficult to unwire or rewire them to respond differently.**"ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, your body makes it easier to repeat things that you've done, said, or thought before compared to learning something new. Neurons that fire together wire together. They make a path, a trail, a highway, that becomes easier and easier to travel down.

So: Once you have a thought, or an action, you're more likely to have it again. And once you have it again, you're more likely to have it again. And again. And again.

It started with Adam and Eve, went to their boys, and spread from there to the point that every thought was only evil all the time. That's why habits, routines, addictions, and sins are hard to break. They've worn a path in you all the way down to your neurological cells...down to your nervous system, from the brain to the extremities. And this can be so well-worn that your brain, when it finds itself anywhere near the start of one of those paths – it gets sucked into that path without you even trying. So for the person who has an addiction to alcohol, when they find themselves in a situation where they have always had a drink or 5, being in that situation triggers their desire for alcohol again, and even pulls them in that direction. For the person who's looked at porn on a computer for years, that's why just sitting at the computer or holding smartphone is a temptation – your brain starts to gravitate toward that trail and literally send signals down your neurological pathways that are so well-worn. For the person who's been cussing for years and years, or using God's name in vain, those words have worn a path that the mind goes down without even thinking about it. In fact, my guess is that this whole neurological phenomenon is why even though the English language has over 170,000 words, the average person only uses about 5,000 of them – we have well-worn neurological pathways for the words we use. We don't really even think about what we say (though we probably should!). Of course, the other reason is that a lot of those 170,000 words are almost useless to every day language – like neuropsychologist. I've never used that word before in my life and there's a really good chance I never will again. 😊

So, when we see that the pinnacle of God's creation – made in his image, with free will, that he made on the 6th day – when it goes against what God said...and then it gets repeated, and then repeated again, and spreads throughout humanity to the point that every thought is evil...it shouldn't come as a big surprise that we can have similar difficulties. The path of sin is well-worn in our lives – and it starts with our minds. And so when the Bible speaks of “renewing our minds” – it is spot-on, and it is so much truer than

the authors realized.

Fortunately, new pathways *can* begin to be forged. What started there in the garden can be reversed. The mind can in fact be renewed and reprogrammed. It doesn't begin by any statement that we might make for our selves – like the “I am wealthy, healthy, and happy” self-manifestation statements from the self-help blog. Instead, it begins by *repenting* – making a conscientious decision with our brains...with our minds...*before* we find ourselves at the start of those paths...to turn around (that's what “repent” means) and turn away from the poor decisions we've made and to take a mental walk away from the paths we've forged in our neurons, and instead walk down a different path. This is what God would have us do. It's clear in Scripture. And he doesn't leave us on our own – His desire is that we would come to Him and lean upon Him to help with that, as opposed to hiding from Him as Adam and Eve did. The Holy Spirit, the words of Scripture, the community of saints around us are all ways that God strengthens and encourages us in our new pathways. And so we make conscious decisions that next time, I'm going to make a different choice, pick up a different drink, go to a different website, use a different word. By doing that, we begin to forge new paths, new patterns, and new habits, as God leads, encourages, and strengthens us.

And the good news is that just as bad choices and habits and addictions can make a path in us that's easy to follow, so can good choices make a path that becomes easier and easier to follow. Learning to love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself are new paths that can be forged in us. Forging new neurological pathways that lead to holy and pure living can be done. It's how God created you to live, and it begins when the path between us and God is well-worn. That path is the first one to get wired together and worn so well that it's a clear and obvious path in our lives. And from there, God will lead us to the right thoughts, right actions, right living that He created us to experience. How is that path between you and God? Well-worn? Overgrown with branches from lack of use?

So, this is the story of the Bible. It's the story of God and the path in each of

our lives to Him, and the other paths in our lives that we stray down, and God's pursuit of us to get us back on the narrow path he calls us to tread upon. It's a story that goes from Creation to Redemption, with God at the center of it. He's the main character, revealing himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But you and I are significant, too. We're created in His image, God says that you are very good, and it's his desire that in our free will we would love him back just as He loves us. And with our mind centered on Jesus, with His Word instructing us and shaping us and filling up our thought life, we can have the mind of Christ, turn away from the wide roads that we've paved in our lives and instead find the narrow path that Jesus has made, and that he invites us to walk down every single day, that leads us to Him. May it be so for each of us this week and ever more. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today's sermon correlates to Chapter 1 in "The Story." We took orders at church for a few weeks. We ran out, and are getting more in time for the second Sunday in the message. You can also get a copy on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for "NIV The Story Bible."

ⁱⁱ There are others, too: Romans 8:31-39; Colossians 3:2; Philippians 4:7 (and 8, as mentioned earlier in the sermon), etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ From Curt Thompson, a psychiatrist in the Washington, D.C., area.

<http://www.beingknown.com/2010/07/neurons-that-fire-together-wire-together/>