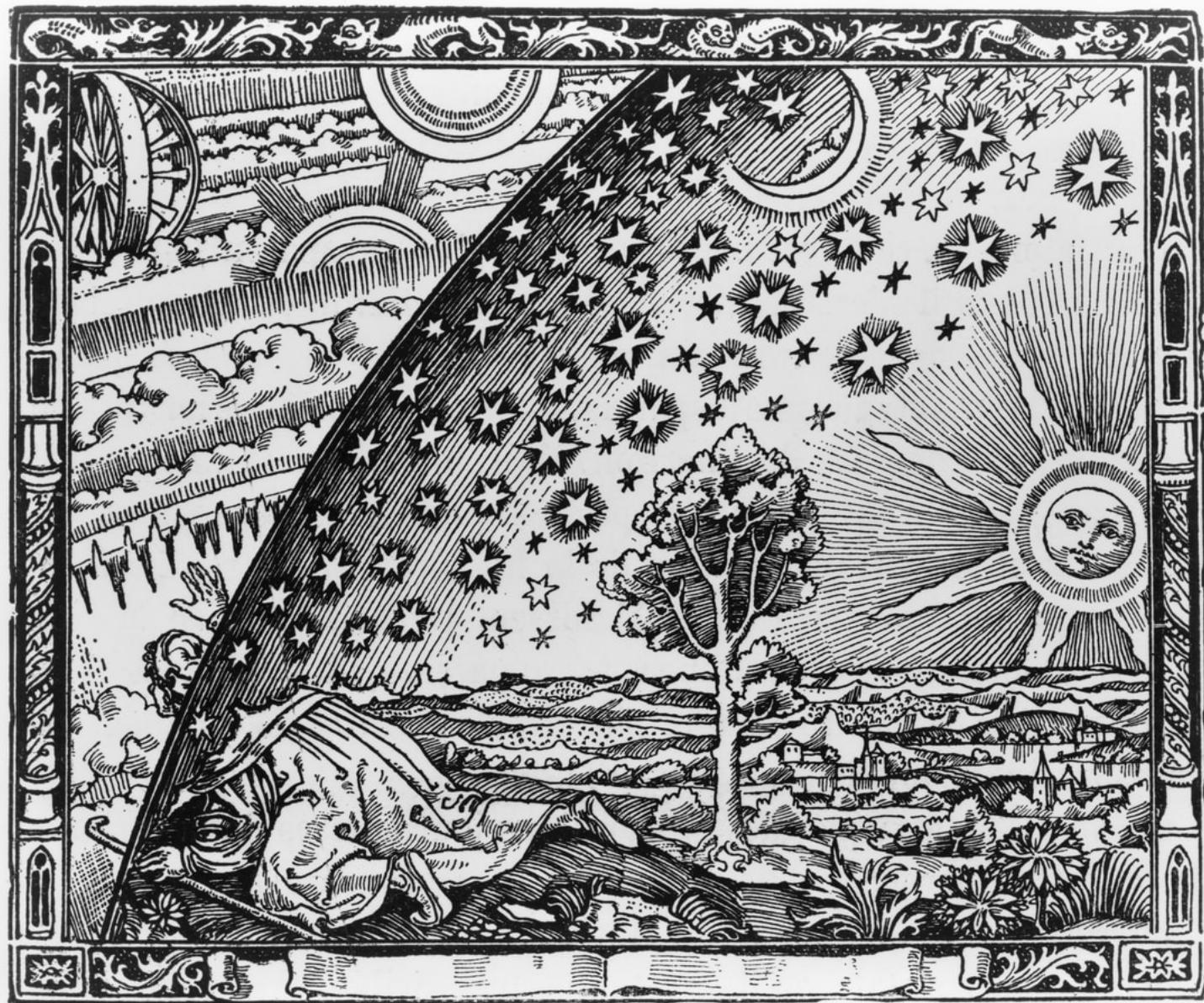


# It Is Good: Embracing the Spiritual Imagination of Scripture

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Preaching on:  
Genesis 1:1–2:4a

A literal reading of the creation story doesn't really work for me. If you prefer to read this or any other part of your Bible literally, I won't try to talk you out of it. I will always try to remind you that there are

other faithful ways of reading and interpreting holy scripture. It's OK to read your Bible literally, that is one option. But it's not OK to try to make everybody else read the Bible literally, or to proclaim that a literal reading of the Bible is the only legitimate way of reading the Bible, or for that matter to claim that reading the Bible literally is not itself quite an impressive interpretive feat—trying to ignore the fact that a literal reading of the Bible requires just as many (if not more) sermons, and books, and explanations to fully understand it as the more open, or spiritual, or poetic readings of the Bible do.

Also, the fact of the matter is that no one reads their Bible entirely literally or entirely metaphorically. Everyone reads it both ways, the issue is which parts do you read which way. In a Boston-area town in Massachusetts there's a great story told by the local clergy group. A Baptist minister in town was well-known for calling all the local phone numbers in his area, and whoever picked up the phone he would introduce himself and invite them to come to church. So, going through all the local numbers like this, he eventually called the priest at the town's Catholic church. Being a good evangelical Baptist, the minister decided to evangelize his Catholic colleague a little, and he advised him to start reading his Bible literally. "Oh, I do!" said the priest. "*You do?*" "Sure, I do. Like when Jesus said at the last supper, 'this is my body, this is my blood,' I take that literally." Now, Baptists, of course, unlike Catholics, believe that communion is just a symbolical observance—no real body and no real blood involved. And so the Baptist minister said, "Well, Father it's been nice talking to you," and hung up the phone. Nobody reads their Bible just one way. It's all a mix.

The phenomenon of the exclusively literal reading of scripture is really a modern phenomenon. You could be forgiven for thinking that way back when everybody read their Bible literally and then we let faith slip and we started to read scripture metaphorically just so we could get rid of the parts we don't like or something like that. But it was always a mix until we get to modernity.

And in modernity our culture has come to believe that the only truth, or the supreme truth, is the literal truth. We want to know what happened. Just the facts, please. Don't tell me what it means, OK? Meaning isn't truth. Meaning is subjective. Meaning is an illusion. Meaning is nothing more than a way of constructing oppressive narratives that benefit the powerful and the privileged. The universe, everything around us, the light, the water, the sky, the sun and the moon and the stars, life itself, human existence—there's no magic there. No spirit. No meaning. If you want the truth of any of these things, you need to get a scalpel and a microscope out. And if you break the universe, and even human beings down to their smallest constituent parts, they're all just a sort of chaos of dead atoms (which are mostly just empty space) bouncing around—nothing more. And that is the literal truth in modernity.

There's a new theory in philosophy and science right now that's getting a lot of attention that argues it is statistically likely that we're not even living in a "real world" at all. Instead, we're all living in a simulation in somebody else's supercomputer. And all we really are in that case is math. Dead numbers being crunched in the bowels of a computer.

The problem with a literalistic reading of scripture is that it basically assents to modernity's worldview. It says that the only truth that can stand up to modernity and nihilism is literal truth. Meaning won't cut it. Mystery won't cut it. Poetry and spirituality won't get the job done... But demanding a literal reading of the Bible limits the spiritual imagination. And it is only a resurgence of spiritual imagination that can save us from the dead, spiritless, meaningless, simulated (literally unreal) universe of modernity's materialism and physicalism.

So, no, I don't read Genesis literally, but that doesn't mean I don't read it faithfully. What's that old saying? "We take our Bibles seriously, not literally." Here's something neat to know about the Genesis creation myth. The original community who told and wrote this myth down didn't think that they were telling a literal, scientific, nuts-and-bolts story. It was for them an act of spiritual imagination.

There is an older creation myth, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, which is strikingly similar to the Genesis creation myth. There's not time to go into all the similarities between the two, and what really matters is the big difference. In the *Enuma Elish* a pantheon of related gods are all fighting and vying for power. Marduk, the sun god, triumphantly cuts his grandmother, the sea goddess Tiamat in half. Half her body becomes the earth and the other half becomes the sky.

It is a blood-soaked, dominating, almost warmongering understanding of how the universe works. And the ancient Israelites had first-hand, tragic experience of the Babylonian empire's violence, their drive to dominate, and their warmongering. So, when it came time for the ancient Israelites to tell the story of the beginning of everything, they were not lamely attempting to produce a sort of pseudo-scientific account. They were producing a cultural commentary, perhaps an act of political and spiritual resistance to empire, and a theological improvement on the Babylonian story.

God didn't kill the dark chaotic waters, instead God's spirit hovered or swept over them. And instead of a blood-soaked, hypermasculine, dominating creation energy, we have a story of a God who forms the universe with restraint, with nurture, with care, with blessings, with rest, and with this refrain throughout, "And God saw that it was good." It was good. It was good. It was good.

That is what our ancient spiritual ancestors wanted us to know. That is what they wanted us to carry in our hearts and in our imaginations, "It is good. It is good. It is good." It is good to be alive! It is good to be a part of this spirit-filled universe. Yes, that beauty you see is real. Yes, that meaning you feel in life is real. It was there in the beginning. And I hope we don't lose the ability to see it, to feel it. But that will depend on our ability to nurture in ourselves and in our culture a spiritual imagination that doesn't deny the facts, but that—I don't know?—hovers over them, sweeps over them and fills them with life again.