

Truly Human

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[0 : 00] Our sermon text today is Genesis chapter 1 verses 26 through 31.

That's page number 1 in the Pew Bible. If you're here and you're new to Christianity or if you're exploring spiritual things, this is a great time to be here at Trinity.

This fall we're walking through the opening pages of the Bible to learn who God is, who we are, and what story we find ourselves in. And there's so much in these early chapters of Genesis that we're going to take a couple of weeks for each one just to make sure we don't miss the richness of what is here for us in God's word.

So we're back in Genesis 1 this morning, now focusing on verses 26 through 31. So let me pray for us and then I'll read. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, indeed there's no one like you. None greater in majesty, none greater in mercy.

[1 : 08] We pray that by your spirit this morning we would be able to see more of you and more of who we are and who you've created us to be in your image. We ask this in your name, Lord. Amen.

Amen. Genesis 1 verse 26. Then God said, Let us make man in our image after our likeness.

And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image.

In the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And said to them, And God said, And God said, And subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

And God said, And behold, And behold, And behold, I've given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.

[2 : 22] And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made. And behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Flannery O'Connor, the great southern fiction writer, once said, In the long run, a people is known, not by its statements or its statistics, but by the stories it tells.

What story are you telling about you? About us, humans. Or as the ancient Hebrew poet wrote in Psalm 8, What is man?

Humanity. That you are mindful of him. Last week we saw that the beginning of the biblical story here in Genesis 1 starts with, God. And a God who's not some distant, cold deity, but a God who brings order from chaos, and a God who fills the lifeless with life, and a God who invites the weary in to rest.

But what about us humans? Who are we? Now I probably don't have to convince you that this is an important question.

[3 : 42] Most of us have asked at one point or another, Who am I? What am I here for? For some of us, it's a fleeting thought that we just sort of brush aside in our busyness. For others, it becomes a gnawing concern.

But how we answer that question is sort of like the rudder of a ship turning that seemingly small thing, answering that seemingly small question, vastly changes the direction, the trajectory, the outcome of a life.

So who are you? What story are you telling? There are lots of stories on offer today.

On the one hand, are you the result of nothing more than time, and matter, and energy, and chance? In other words, are you basically the lucky accident of a cold cosmos, a collection of atoms that just sort of happened?

And one day, will dissolve just as meaninglessly? Or on the other end of the spectrum, are you a divine spark trapped in the material world?

[4 : 50] Trying to get out, maybe caught in a cycle of birth and rebirth? Maybe some kind of spirituality could get you unstuck so that the real you could get out of all this material, dark stuff we call matter?

What story are you telling? And you know, the funny thing is, both of those two ideas that I just mentioned, both of them are ancient and modern at the same time. On the one hand, this materialism, that we're just sort of matter and chance, and on the other hand, what we might call Gnosticism, that we're sort of a spirit stuck in this dark world, they've both been around for thousands of years, and both in their own way are still around today.

Don't think that one is new and one is old. But the reality is, there's a better story to tell. And one that actually makes better sense of what we see and feel and know.

And it's found right here in Genesis 1. The true story of what it means to be human. So this morning, I want to point to three things that we see here about who we are as human beings.

who you are. So, first, who are you? You are the result of the intention of God.

[6 : 14] Look at verse 27. Verse 27 reads, Then God said, Let us make man. Now, the word man here is a general term. It carries the sense of all humanity. So this passage is talking about all humankind.

But here in verse 27, something sort of unique happens. Now, up to this point in the chapter, God has just spoken and it was, right? The sky, the seas, the earth, the stars, the animals, let there be, God said, and there was.

But here, for the first time in Genesis 1, we hear God deliberating, as it were. We're given a brief glimpse into God's own inner eternal intention.

There's this pause in the narrative and we hear God say, let us make humanity. As if to drive home the point that what God is about to do here is done consciously with deep design.

There is a rich, personal purpose of God unfolding here. You are the deliberate result of the intention of God.

[7 : 18] But who is this us that God speaks of? Let us, it says. Who is us? Now, some have thought that God is speaking here to perhaps the heavenly court of angelic beings.

God is, after all, the creator of all things seen and unseen. Perhaps God here, presumably having already created those heavenly beings, at some point is now addressing them. Let us. And yet, the problem with that view is, as these verses plainly show, God doesn't create humanity in the image of angels, nor are the angels created in the image of God.

No, God creates humanity in the image of God. The us and the our of verse 26 refer to God alone. So who is this God? I like how Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner explained it.

He said, what we're dealing with here in verse 26 with this us and our is a plural of fullness. In fact, the Hebrew word for God is also grammatically plural as well to express the fact that God is, well, God.

There's a holy fullness in God. and you see this fullness will be unfolded and revealed throughout the whole of scripture as God progressively reveals more and more of that fullness of who he is to us.

[8 : 48] Sort of like an acorn that has all of the DNA of a fully grown tree so that DNA packed into this us and our of Genesis 1 26 will grow throughout scripture.

Or as a mountain range sort of seen from afar grows in detail the closer and closer you get. So God's fullness will become clearer and clearer until in the dawning of the New Testament we get to see the full picture.

And what we see from the perspective of the New Testament in the whole Bible is that God's fullness is what we've come to call the Trinity. That the one God eternally exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now, did the human author of Genesis 1 intend in his human mind to communicate the fully fledged doctrine of the Trinity here? Maybe not.

But standing where we stand from the place of the New Testament, the tree fully grown, the mountain up close and personal, it's not hard to look back at Genesis and see what the Holy Spirit has inspired.

[9 : 58] because what do we see in Genesis 1? There is God and God's Spirit and God's Word all at work in creation. And this God says in his fullness, let us make humanity in our image.

Friends, you see, you are the result of the deliberate intention of the very triune God we worship and praise. And that means that you are not merely the accident of time and matter and chance.

The triune God has created you with deep intention. You are here for a reason. You have a place in the divine story. God, the author and director of all things, has not just put out a casting call, but God's actually chosen you for the part that you are to play.

humanity. But what is that part? This brings us to the second point we see here in Genesis 1.

You are not just a result of the divine intention. Second, you are a bearer of God's image. If verse 26 that we just were talking about is God's intention for humanity, then in verse 27 we see God's creation of humanity.

[11 : 24] Look at that verse again, verse 27. So God created man, created humanity in his own image. In the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

Now, you have to imagine how these words would have first sounded to the people of Israel. Living in the wilderness, having spent generations in slavery, still homeless, outside the promised land, and here comes this language language of God's image to them.

Well, you see, in the ancient world, that's how kings would have described themselves. The king bore the image of God. He was the offspring of the gods, the son of the gods, ruling on earth in the stead of the gods.

He alone possessed that kind of dignity. You know, today it's not that much different.

It's still the rich and the famous and the powerful that we think have the real dignity and honor and glory and worth. But that is not true.

[12 : 37] Friends, we have forgotten who we are. The world says only the kings are made in God's image, but Genesis 1 says that every man and every woman is the very image of God, possessing unsurpassed dignity and worth and value.

And just to drive it home, the end of verse 27 says, male and female. He created them as if to say this dignity of bearing God's image is not limited to only one part of humanity.

Male and female equally and fully bear the image of God. This was unheard of in the ancient world. could there be anything more revolutionary and liberating than that thought all of us created in God's image?

All of us possessing a dignity beyond imagination and beyond calculation. Whether male or female, young or old, rich or poor, all races, all nationalities, all abilities, all people without exclusion, all of us bear God's image.

C.S. Lewis ends his great sermon The Weight of Glory by saying, you've never met a mere mortal.

[13 : 56] Humans are creatures, yes. We are not God, but we are all creatures made in the image of God. And this has deep ethical implications.

This makes all the difference in how we live and act and treat one another. Because all humans are created in God's image, the church says no to racism, to sexism, to ageism, to really any way of thinking that takes one category of people and says they're not worthy of value and respect and worth.

We reject that outright. And because all humans are created in God's image, we celebrate the dignity and intrinsic worth of all people, even those the world would deem poor or useless or inconvenient.

Isn't it funny that today we live in a time when that idea is loved and celebrated. We want to say yes to that. And here in the Bible is the very ground for being able to say and do that.

how must that have struck those Israelites, poor, homeless, knowing nothing in their past but slavery?

[15 : 14] How does it strike you? Friend, regardless of how your job or your looks or your ability or your wealth stacks up to those around you, you possess something that even the angels do not possess.

You bear the very image of God. So lift your head high. You have a dignity that nothing in this world can give and nothing can take away.

As evidence of that dignity, look again at verse 27. Do you notice something odd about that verse in the rest of chapter 1? It's written in poetry.

Now it doesn't rhyme. Hebrew poetry didn't rhyme but it was about rhythm and repetition. So our English translations rightly set it off in verse.

The first poem of the whole Bible, what does it celebrate? The creation of humanity in God's image. church. Something so beautiful is happening here that it can only be expressed in art, in verse, in poetry.

[16 : 32] God is singing over his people. And near the end of the Old Testament we find the same thing. The little prophetic book of Zephaniah chapter 3 verse 17 says, God will rejoice over you with gladness.

He will quiet you by his love. He will exalt over you with loud singing. You are a bearer of God's own image. You have a dignity that nothing can take away.

Now there's been a lot of theological discussion over what exactly this image of God refers to. Is it referring to the way in which we resemble God or does it refer to the way in which we as humans represent God?

In other words, as bearers of God's image, do we resemble God in some way that the rest of creation does not? Maybe our capacity for reason or morality or maybe our capacity for beauty and art or for language or for love and relationships?

And historically, the church has actually pointed to all these ways in which we resemble God because you see the family traits of the triune God are all over us humans.

[17 : 46] God is, after all, perfect in knowledge and goodness and beauty and love and we, his image bearers, reflect this in a creaturely way. Yes, we're not God but we reflect this in a unique way amidst all creation.

We bear God's image and likeness. But the other way of seeing the image of God is that it refers to the way in which we not just resemble God but the way we represent God.

That is, the way in which we as humans are God's representatives amidst creation. You see, when an ancient king would conquer a city, often he erected an image of himself in the middle of town.

Put a statue there that looked just like him as if to say, this is now part of my kingdom. The image represented the rule of the king. But when God created the world and wanted to inaugurate his kingdom in the midst of creation, he didn't make a statue or a graven image.

He made humans. Humanity would represent God's loving rule. Male and female would take up the office, the role of image bearers.

[18 : 58] That means we are the envoys, the stewards, the vice regents of the king ruling on his behalf. And that brings us to our third point.

Who are you? You are the result of God's intention. You are the bearer of God's image. But third, you are the recipient of God's commission.

In verse 28, God blesses humanity and then God gives them this command. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over everything that moves on the earth.

You see, God created us not just with immeasurable dignity, that is in his image, but also with a thrilling responsibility. Subdue and have dominion, God says.

Go forth into this creation and create and steward and enjoy and make something of it for my sake. Use all the dignity and the gifts I've given you and make creation sing my praise.

[20 : 05] I have sung over you. Now you unleash this creation that I've made and make it sing for me. I'm extending my kingdom through you. Subdue and have dominion.

Those words are rich, are they not? With authority. In fact, when you study the use of those words throughout the rest of the Bible, they are words used of kings.

It is a royal office God has placed us in. But how are we to use this authority? Well, I think it's pretty clear from Genesis 1 as his image bearers, we are meant to carry out this commission in a way that God would.

And as we look at Genesis 1, how does God exercise his authority over creation? Well, it's in a way that brings life and flourishing and even joy.

The commission here in Genesis 1.28 is not a license to use and abuse creation for our own selfish purposes. No, it's a calling to steward the created order on behalf of the one true king, the living God.

[21 : 18] We have to care for creation because it's not our own, it's his. if I were going away on a trip for a month or two and I asked you to house sit for me, what would I do?

Well, I would hand you the keys to the home and probably give you some instructions on how to care for things and feed the fish and then I would give you functional authority over the house. You would have the responsibility and the privilege of living there and making the decisions.

But how would you approach this job? would your next step be to call the local construction guy and say, hey, there's a lot of free materials over here, you can come scrap them, tear them down and just give me the money, just forward it right into my account.

No, ultimately the house isn't your own, you'd probably take extra good care of it knowing that I was going to return. And that is meant to be our approach to this world that God's made and placed us in, to care for it, to steward it and yes, to have authority and responsibility for it, knowing that it belongs to God to bring out its best for our king.

So what do you make of God's commission here? Oftentimes our lives feel like a series of disconnected and ultimately insignificant events, don't they?

[22 : 44] Many of us, if we're honest or bored or frustrated with our everyday lives and we long for a deeper meaning to what we do.

Alan DeBotten, the British essayist, published a book a few years ago called *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*. It's actually a very beautifully written book and at the end of that book he steps back and asks the question, what is our work really for?

And DeBotten is actually a very thoughtful unbeliever and he's quite honest at that point. He says, you know that at the end of the day the importance of work isn't its enduring value, he says.

Because for him time will eventually wipe everything away. No, he says, perhaps in the end the enduring value of work is in its capacity to distract us from the inevitable.

Let death find us, he says, as we are building up our matchstick protests against its waves. Is that all we can say about our future, our labors as humans?

[24 : 00] Building up matchstick protests against the waves of oblivion. But Genesis gives us a much different story and one that makes much more sense of our desire for significance.

Our work is part of God's commission to cultivate creation for his eternal glory. Each of us, whether we want to think it or not, is a culture shaper for the king in our homes, in our offices, in our neighborhoods here at church.

And the work that matters to God isn't just what we might call spiritual work or church work. No. Engineers, craftsmen, teachers, artists, manufacturers, managers, builders, cleaners, all of this is the unfolding of God's commission to care and cultivate his world.

So friend, take up your work with purpose for if it's done for God, it's no mere matchstick on the shore. it's a monument to the living eternal God, a shaping and stewarding of his world.

But here we have to pause, don't we, and take stock. If we're honest, this commission, this responsibility we have as humans made in God's image, we haven't always carried it out the way we should, have we?

[25 : 31] Genesis 1 is the beginning of the story and how have we lived out this dignity and responsibility we've been given? Too often, we've not treated one another as bearers of God's image and too often, we've labored for our own sake and not for God's sake.

We've used creation, not cared for it. God created us to rule under him but instead, we've rebelled and we've lived our own way with no reference to God in God's world and the result isn't joy and flourishing, it's decay and death and loneliness.

Dignity lost, authority squandered. And so, is that the end of the story? Humanity begins with great expectations but we end in ruin and decay.

What starts with a bang ends with a whimper as T.S. Eliot once wrote. Is there any hope for us? Can we begin again maybe, go back to the start?

But as we look over human history, has there been anyone able to live like this? The way Genesis 1 says we were created to live.

[26 : 54] Amidst all the wreckage and ruin, maybe if there was one there could be hope for us but where do we find such a one? But friends, the good news of the Bible is that there is.

There is one who came and bore the image of God perfectly. Who used all his authority to bring life and to heal creation and to fulfill the commission of God.

At long last, a true human. Who is this one? And, could it be that if we were somehow connected to him or united to him or somehow invited into his presence maybe we too could be healed and repaired and maybe even forgiven and maybe put right.

Maybe somehow this image of God in us could be repaired. But what would that take? What would this truly human one have to do to rescue us and lift us up with him?

That is the story of the New Testament. God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, took our full humanity into himself and he bore the image of God perfectly.

[28 : 28] Jesus lived a perfect life of dignity and life-giving authority. But after three years of public ministry, he would go to his death and Pilate, the Roman governor, would declare at Jesus' trial, what would he say?

Behold the man. Were truer words ever spoken because indeed, Jesus was the true human.

Behold the man. And yet, at that moment when Pilate uttered those words, Jesus had actually been stripped of his dignity and his authority.

So that our dignity could be restored, Jesus was losing his and then hung naked on a cross. And so that our authority could be repaired, behold the man, he was made powerless and died.

But on the third day, Jesus, having laid down his dignity and having laid down his authority, took it up again. Jesus, fully God and fully human, rose from the grave and rising, he began a new creation so that those united to him, connected to him through faith by the Holy Spirit would receive forgiveness of sins and would be renewed in the image of God.

[29 : 56] And Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father so that united to him through faith we might be restored in God's commission to care and steward for God's creation once again, now under the leadership of a good king.

So friends, what story are you telling? The invitation to us this morning is to unite our story to the story of Jesus and through living faith in him, our risen king, our true lord, the living, true human, we can be restored to the dignity and authority that God created us to have in the very beginning.

And that gift of grace through Jesus Christ will know no end. The end of the story. The Bible ends with heaven and earth being united at last.

those in Christ seeing God face to face and Revelation 25 says and they will reign forever and ever. What began in creation and was lost in Adam has been regained in Christ and has offered to us now to live out in this age and on into the age to come.

So you see now what it means to be the church? Here, now, in New Haven? it means through Christ to bear God's image to show the world together what it means to be truly human, to be a sign of what's in store and then to invite everyone to join in because it's on the basis not of what we do but on what Jesus has done.

[31 : 44] The image of God. Let's pray. Father, we pray this morning that you would help the things that you have been teaching us in your word here in Genesis 1 to sink down.

Lord, many of us here this morning do not feel dignified. God, if we're honest, we feel ashamed and embarrassed. Help to fix our eyes on Jesus who for us and for our salvation out of love came and bore all the shame for us so that we might be renewed.

Father, many of us are feeling powerless and stuck, feeling like our day-to-day is just a dead end.

But Lord Jesus, if you reign on your throne as you do and if we are your people, your body on earth, then surely none of our labor is in vain.

God, I pray that you would help us as a church and as Christians to catch a fresh vision for how you're using our lives, even in the mundane, to make much of you.

[33 : 22] And Father, I know there are some here this morning who, Lord, aren't quite sure what to make of all this. God, I pray that you would give them the courage to ask for clarity, to ask for the opening of their hearts, that God, if you are real, and if it is true, you've made us in your image, and if it is true that Jesus has come to heal that image and to make us new, Lord, I pray that they would have the courage to ask you to reveal that to them.

And then I pray that you would give them the courage and the desire to step into it by your spirit. Lord, we ask all this in the name of Christ.

Amen. Well, the song that we're going to close with this morning is Jesus Shall Reign. This is a song about Christ being the true king and how his kingdom will spread throughout the whole world and how we, his followers, get to be a part of that work and get to share in that joy.

So let's stand and let's sing this together in response. so let's