

January 21, 2024

Origin Stories: The Imago Dei, Genesis 1:26-31 Outline

We are in our series Origin Stories in the book of Genesis looking at the Imago Dei “The image of God” that Pastor Terry introduced last week, and our message today coincides with Sanctity of Human Life Sunday- which is a Sunday each year in January where Christians around the country remember that all human life is sacred, mourn the reality of abortion in America where nearly every year 1M babies are not granted the right to life, and we pray and intercede for those who do not have a voice. I recognize that many people hear these words through a political filter, and while there are political implications, for Christians this ought to be first and foremost a biblical ethics issue, not what does a politician, or influencer or advocacy group say, but what does God say? There are others who hear these words through a deeply personal filter- some of us have heart wounds because of past decisions, or the decisions of others. I’m the son of an abortion survivor. And while my mom and grandmom are a story of redemption (a story I told on this day in 2018), for decades my grandmom had to re-open those wounds when this topic came up at church or this day came on the calendar. But I also know that she would tell you if she were alive, that though it was hard- it reminded her that God is a God of forgiveness, of grace and restoration and makes all this and more available through the gospel of Jesus Christ. So for those who hear politics- I’d encourage you to set that aside and be open-minded. And for those of you for whom this is hard for other reasons, know that there is grace for you today.

Pray: *Father, on this Sanctity of Human Life Sunday we look to you the giver of all life. We ask you for the courage and compassion we need to live as faithful stewards of human life. How we long for the day when “death shall be no more”—death in all of its expressions, especially on this day, the death of unborn children. Jesus, give us gospel courage to rise and contend for the sacredness of human life. We thank you for the strides being made in our lifetime to turn the narrative and save lives. May you give us wisdom and grace. We also ask for gospel compassion. Jesus, show us how to love and care for women and men whose stories are marked by abortion—either as victims or agents. Only the gospel can bring healing. And give us the eyes of Jesus to see those who need to experience God’s love through us. In Jesus’ Name, amen.*

Let me frame where we are headed this morning: In our Genesis series we are seeking to compare the dominant worldview of western culture, Modern Secularism, and its origin story, with the origin story from the Bible. We believe as Christians, we have a much better story, not only more hopeful and filled with meaning, but one that is true and works in reality. So what I want to do today is to briefly **compare Modern Secularism’s view of human life to a Christian view of human life**, anchored in Genesis 1. Next I want to talk about the implications of a Christian View of the Sanctity of Life for unborn children, and more **specifically the implications for children born with special needs**. Lastly we are going to hear the **personal stories of 3** people from our church family who have or work with children with special needs, and then close with how our church is **responding to these significant needs and opportunities**.

Modern Secularism's Story: Human Life is a Cosmic Accident.

Christianity's Story: Human Life is Personally Created by a Loving God

This truth retreads ground we covered in week one, In stark contrast to the cold, impersonal, modern origin story, Genesis 1 begins with God's voice personally speaking life, giving life in an intentional, purpose-filled loving declaration. Listen to King David's poetic personal reflection on this amazing truth.

Psalm 139:13-16

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place.

When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. Don't let anyone ever tell you that you are an accident, or the unintentional result of time and chance- there is no such thing with God.

Modern Secularism's Story: Human Life has no inherent worth, only Bestowed worth by those with Power.

When you cut through the lofty rhetoric of modern secular voices like Sam Harris, or some politicians and activists, you find there is no basis for saying any human life is sacred and has inherent worth. Worth is determined by whoever holds the power. Whether that is the power of the state to determine if an unborn child or child in a foster care system or person facing end of life has worth, or the power of a pregnant mom with an unwanted child, or the power of the parent or man in the picture placing pressure to end the pregnancy.

Christianity's Story: All human beings have inherent worth because we are uniquely made in the image of God.

Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And he blessed them... Every human being has inherent dignity, value and worth because we uniquely bear the image of our creator and reflect his glory (in a special and set apart way from the rest of God's creation, even the angels). Every life is a gift of grace (v. 28 He blessed them) from the giver of all life. Every life has been created with the intended "very good" purpose (fruitfulness, dominion, cultivation) in God's creative work. And this is true for the child-slave in Thailand, or the child with Downs Syndrome hidden from the public in Somalia, as much as it is true for the unborn child in America. God sees their worth regardless of who is in power.

Modern Secularism's story is rooted in survival of the fittest and the strong dominating the weak. Again you will hear the rhetoric of what modern secularists say they believe about what

marginalized voices or what people groups matter to them, with lots of signs and hashtags...but the notion that any weak or voiceless people truly matter is not rooted in secularism's origin story...what they are holding are as Os Guinness calls "the fresh cut flowers" of a Christian story. Their story is based on Darwinism...the story of might equals right.

Christianity's story is that the Bible, and Jesus Himself, call us to care and advocate for the weak, voiceless and defenseless.

Matthew 25:40 "Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine (the naked, poor, widow, orphan, sick), you did for me."

Proverbs 31:8-9

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice.

As a Christian, being pro-life means advocating for the dignity and sanctity of human life at every stage, from the womb to the tomb.

- Pre-born children
- Foster, Adoption and Orphan Care
- Human Trafficking Victims
- Racial Reconciliation
- Poverty and Death from Preventable Diseases
- Those Incarcerated
- Immigrants and Refugees
- Those at the End of Life
- Those with Special Needs and Disabilities

[Slide] A clear tenant of Christianity is that people either by nature or nurture who have special needs and disabilities equally bear the image of God and therefore have inherent dignity, value and worth. Their lives are a gift of grace from God. Each child or adult with special needs and/or disabilities have various capacities to fulfill God's good purpose in and through them.

But it's one thing for me to talk about this, it's far more powerful for you to see the image of God in children with special needs by hearing the stories of parents and those who work with children with special needs.

Three Stories (10 min)

Nate will introduce and invite them all to come up and sit on stools.

Nate Q: You and your husband Matt have a son Daniel who was born with special needs, can you tell us more about your story?

Eileen Voltz [Picture of Family] Response (3 min):

We found out that Daniel would likely have Down Syndrome when I was three months pregnant. There is a blood test that detects extra chromosomes. From that moment on, every appointment included medical professionals asking us if we were sure that we wanted to keep him since life would be very hard for him. As the pregnancy progressed, they told us which states we could still go to if we changed our minds. If you have ever expected a child, can you imagine people routinely asking you if you were sure that you wanted to keep your baby? Sadly in our country, roughly 70% of pregnancies with a pre-natal diagnosis of Down Syndrome are aborted and many other countries are 90-100%.

Daniel is 5 of 6 for us. We lost 2 sets of identical twins before him. That alone made the frequent suggestions of terminating our pregnancy even more unfathomable. To this day, we often wonder why Daniel is the 1 of our 6 God chose to be here. What is his purpose? What is God calling him to do with his time here on earth?

My ability to answer that question is along the lines of our local weather people predicting snow! But I can share what we have experienced these last 11 years as his parents.

He is joy, hope, and love. He makes random strangers smile and sometimes hug each other and he allows us to see the goodness in so many people. Like us, he wants to be included and valued and that is because God created us for community.

Through his struggles, he teaches us patience and the importance of considering the needs of others before our own.

He is loving, kind, and empathetic yet is often overlooked. He can be at an event and be alone or hanging out only with us. I always wonder how long until someone seeks him out. Many times, it will not happen unless we orchestrate it. As they spend time in the community of others, can't they see that Daniel is not there? So why would otherwise loving people not see what is so easy for us to see? And that answer is fairly simple. Historically, people like Daniel have been marginalized and segregated and this has actually impacted their lifespan. In 1950, the median lifespan of a person with Down Syndrome was a mere 5 years. In 1983, they lived, on average, 23 years, and today it is 60 years.

In the end, the medical experts were right in that Daniel's life is significantly harder but certainly not any less joyful. But, what they didn't know is that Jesus sends people like Daniel to earth so that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:1-3 when Jesus heals the blind man)

Nate Q: You and Hayes have been led to enter into the lives of children from hard places, can you tell us about your experience and what that has taught you about the image of God?

Bethany Parnell [Picture of Family] Response (3 min):

Sure! This is my family - we have birthed kids, adopted kids, and were foster parents for a bit so we just invited everybody to the family party! :)

When we started the adoption process, our social worker said “Typical families do not usually need to make an adoption plan.” We started interacting with families and I can honestly say I could not have imagined the situations we were encountering. We started reading books about trauma and how it affects the brain. Stories about detachment, and how that affects children long term. I started researching prenatal drug and alcohol exposure, long term effects, short term effects. It was all terrifying. We had to sort through all of this and decide what we were willing to take on. We were in our mid 20’s, with two babies already, our list was pretty short. But as followers of Jesus, we had to ask “Lord what do you want for us?” Part of that answer came through a visit to a home for kids with disabilities. The joy radiating from the caregivers there inspired us to be open to more.

We came home, changed some paperwork and the next month we got a call. A 4lb 5oz baby boy with a long list of possible and confirmed needs was ready to go home after a month in NICU.

Fast forward to our journey to being foster parents a few years later....we went through a training process to consider the most awful things that happen to families and then ask “how will we care for them?” “How will we help everyone feel safe?”

Adoption was dim, but the foster care world felt like total darkness. Spirit led me to these verses in Psalm 139:
 If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light about me be night,”
 even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light with you.

I started to pray “You see through the darkest night, God give us eyes like you. When I want to look away, help me stay in it. I want to see what you see.”

I had ideas about being “the light of the world” in dark places. I didn’t know I would find THE light of the world. I thought the goodness and blessings of God looked like a comfortable life with a typical family, but I have found more goodness and blessing than I can hold in my wild house. Yes adoption and foster care has broken my heart. I am wide open to grief, confusion, pain, doubt....but even more to joy, love, hope. I have seen miracles, faithfulness and provision I didn’t know was possible.

Families and kids from hard places get a lot of labels: broken, abandoned, forsaken, lost cause. I’ve found those labels are given by eyes that haven’t looked long enough to see the truth:
 Psalm 27:10 Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close.
 Psalm 68:5-6 A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.
 God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing.

When Hayes and Nathaniel joined our family, I got a front row seat to those truths. God is living and breathing in the hard places. If we are willing to look we will see more of the image of God than we could have ever imagined. Don’t miss it.

Nate Q: We've heard from some parents, but you have chosen to serve children with special needs in the schools, can you tell us more about that and how you see the image of God in the children you serve?

Laird Townsend [Picture of Family] Response (3 min):

in addition to what's been shared, I tend to see a reflection of myself in my special needs students. I have worked with elementary/middle severe disabilities for 18 years and from this experience with these students no matter how severe the disability is, its clear that We all have this great sense of self, where we want to be loved, part of our community, have purpose, value and friendships. The biggest struggle I see in students with severe disabilities is the frustration that comes with not being able to communicate, and or be independent like others. I have one student this year who can be very kind, happy and pleasant, she has a hard time speaking and communicating and when she doesn't get her way, she becomes very irrational and dangerous. She is strong, but her balance is very unstable and she can easily hurt herself if she falls or when attacking someone, so you have to support her throughout any given episode and remind her of the expectations. I have been bitten, spit on, scratched and many other things over the years, but my response has to be calm, physically supportive, gentle and patient while providing safety. when the student returns to a rational state, just like many others that have negative behaviors due to their disability, I have to accept her unconditionally, help her become part of her classroom community and continue to encourage her in her educational growth at school and remind her if the expectations and just like my sin manifests itself in my relationship with Jesus, through frustration, my irrational behavior from not Getting My way, Jesus is always there to support me gently, remind me of my expectations, keep me safe, guide my steps back into his will for my life over and over again. So As a teacher, This has been my greatest lesson and reflection of my own relationship with God and how He loves us unconditional, will forgive us over and over while guiding and teaching us His expectations.

Ministry Update with Pastor Nate and David Cordrey (3 min)

Nate will dismiss Eileen, Bethany and Laird then introduce and invite David to stand on the platform.

Nate Q: At Congregational Sunday in November, we shared our vision to launch a new ministry to serve children with special needs and disabilities and their families. You and your wife Nancy lead the team. Can you share an update on how things are coming along since November?

David Cordrey [Picture of Family] Response:

In late November we told you about plans to establish a special needs ministry here at Brandywine. We are working to create the structure and resources needed to provide consistent support for children with disabilities and their families, so they are able to engage on Sunday mornings at Brandywine. Our initial focus is on children, supporting families like you

just heard about, but our hope is we can someday also support adults with disabilities like our daughter Caroline.

Our steering team has had a busy couple of months since we last spoke to you and today I am pleased to give you a brief update on the progress toward launching this important ministry. In late November we held an interest meeting and we were very encouraged by the response. Two weeks ago we repurposed a classroom to serve as a sensory room, providing a safe and calming space for children who need a place to regroup or perhaps need a different environment for learning.... we call it the Chill Zone. Our team is preparing training materials, procedures and other elements needed to equip volunteers to support our special needs community. We are conducting training next week for the individuals that will directly support the children and we are working hard to pair buddies with children and launch the ministry over the next few weeks.

It is exciting to see how God is bringing everything together to establish this ministry so our Brandywine special needs families can fully engage. And, we know the need will only get bigger, a few weeks ago a couple introduced themselves to me on Sunday morning and indicated they had decided to come to Brandywine because they heard we were starting this ministry. It is exciting and a bit intimidating all at the same time! There is still a lot ahead of us to successfully launch the ministry and we greatly appreciate your prayers.

The Response Led by Pastor Nate (2 min)

1. Pray. We want to give you time right now to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you as Bethany sings this song over us.

2. Serve. Unreached People Group: 10% of families with children who have special needs attempt to attend church, for many of them to think about coming to church seems like a mountain. These families and children need a lot of care and support. And the amazing thing is that serving in this way is an opportunity to receive a blessing, to deepen in your relationship with the Lord, and in your relationships in this community. **Slide on Screen** QR code on the screen. If you like more information about getting involved in the ministry: prayer team, being trained to be a buddy.

Response Song (Bethany): Called me Higher (5 min)

Closing Announcements and Benediction by Pastor Nate (2 min)