

“It Was Good”
 Genesis 1:1-2:4a
 A Sermon preached by The Rev. Douglas M. Donley
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 University Baptist Church
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At our worship planning retreat in early July, the team mused about and wondered about our twin pandemic years. We thought of how we shifted to worship and meetings in little boxes on a screen. We thought about how we needed each other. We wondered about this new normal and what it might teach us. And then as we returned to our beautiful sanctuary, there was a blessed familiarity, alongside the sense that something had shifted within us. While we love this building and the memories it holds and the opportunities that are nurtured in its halls, we realized this past year that there have been several sacred spaces. That maybe it's more than the physical space, but the holiness that is revealed in between these physical spaces. So, we'll spend the year considering what is sacred about those spaces that we inhabit, both physically and emotionally. Spaces that exist on a temporal plane and a mystical or metaphysical plane. We'll consider liminal space, virtual space alongside physical space.

The Biblical history is full of stories that give prominence to physical space. The Promised Land, the Temple, high places and parting seas. It makes sense to look at all of these and see what lingering wisdom and challenges they incur in our collective psyches.

And so we start out with a familiar creation story. It's important to know that there are at least three creation stories in Genesis alone. Chapter 1, chapter 2 and chapter 9. All are very different and each will get a Sunday this fall.

So, let's start at the very beginning. A very good place to start.

The first thing we need to know is that this is not history that is being portrayed here. It is mystery. The author is not trying to scientifically explain creation. The writer is trying to show us the mystery and awesomeness of God and of creation.

The second thing we need to know is that the God in this story is named Elohim. In the second chapter, God is named Yahweh. This is a clue that it was a different author, speaking with a different concept of God. Most scholars posit that Genesis 1 was written in the 6th century BCE around the time of the exile. It comes from the priestly school of thought. The priestly writers of the Hebrew bible were interested in dealing with people's hopelessness and despair. They did so by writing about order and concreteness. All of the lists of kings and lots of the Levitical rules come from the priestly writers. The people needed structure. They needed order since their lives were in chaos. And that's what this creation story gives them.

The good news to the exiles is that life in God's well-ordered world can be joyous and grateful. The relationship between God and humanity is one of trust. There is no coercion, only free gracious commitment and invitation. The purpose of creation is unity. Imagine if that was how we looked at the world? Wouldn't that be good?

Good. That's the word for today.

In Genesis 1, creation is good. It is said over and over again. It was good. And when humanity was created on the sixth day, God said it was very good.

As we join God in the creative process this fall, how might we find encouragement by this God who makes things good?

Traditional Christianity does not believe that creation is good, but that creation is part and parcel of the fall and the introduction of sin. We'll get to that in two weeks when we consider a completely different creation story from Genesis. How might we need to be recreated to make things good again?

To understand the goodness of creation portrayed in this story, we need to understand how it is different from other creation stories. Israel was trying to set itself apart from other religious traditions when they started to own this story. It's crafted in a way to portray Israel as unique.

Look at how this creation story opposes itself to other ancient accounts of creation:

- In other belief systems, the moon, the stars, the earth and the sun are all gods. In this story, they are all created by one God.
- In other creation stories creation happens and there is immediate conflict. Just look at Adam and Eve. In this story God creates order out of chaos. And the result is rest and thanksgiving.
- In other stories, conflict between gods causes creation. In the Babylonian epic poem Enuma Elish, the male god Marduk kills the sea goddess Tiamat and creates the world after splitting her body in half and scattering her innards—a world destined to be one of chaos. In Genesis 1 God only speaks and like a cosmic big bang, the universe and all its inhabitants are created. “In the beginning was the Word”, rings true. Walter Brueggemann calls the world, God's speech-creature.
- In many creation stories there are a number of gods. This story shows one God and one God alone, although in a nod to polytheistic understanding, God says in 1:26 “let us make humanity in our image”.
- In radical departure from the second creation story in Genesis, male and female are both created equally and are both in the image of God.
- In Job, we hear of behemoth and leviathan, evil monsters of the deep, an echo of the beliefs of near eastern religions where sea creatures were on par with the creative forces of the world (not unlike the goddess Tiamat). On the fifth day, Genesis 1:21, God creates the great sea monsters. They are subordinate to God.
- There is no opponent in this story, contrary to others. Satan doesn't exist. Angels don't exist, spirits don't exist.
- God is a god of life and everything is good.

The theology of Genesis 1 is one of blessing. There is no sense of fallenness. There is no sense that we need to be saved from anything. In creation is God's goodness, God's blessing, God's image. This is unique. It does not exist in ancient near eastern texts. It is derived from the faith-life of Israel. The faith in this benevolent and good-creating God saves Israel and restores their faith. And might save and restore our faith, too. Sadly, later chapters of Genesis leaves this benevolent good God behind in favor of a more violent and vengeful deity. Popular Christianity has done the same thing.

As I said, in Genesis I, God creates good out of chaos. And yet for all of the popular focus on creationism, it seems that we are bent upon making the world into chaos once again. We cut down rain forests. We pollute our waterways. We delude ourselves into thinking that nuclear waste will be safely stored anywhere for eternity. We burn up fossil fuels at an astonishing rate. We foster mistrust between people and nations and cultures, and the list goes on and on.

There is a Kenyan proverb which states, “treat the earth well...it was not given to you by your parents...it was lent to you by your children.”

But the good news is that the past few years of climate changing chaos has caused more and more people to pay attention to and care for the earth. It took COVID to make us stop driving everywhere and shockingly our air cleaned up. Greta Thurnburgs' words are ringing true and there are other Gretas out there who have found their voices. From the water protectors marching from the Mississippi headwaters to the state capital to the climate scientists, many more are taking stewardship of spaceship earth into account. And it is good.

It is God who made all things and originally called them good. We need to make all we do good for us, for the earth and for our fellow human beings. That is how we join in the creative process with God. That is how we recreate ourselves out of the chaos of our time. When we do this, we tap the everlasting well of the one who makes all things new.

In Genesis 1, God creates order out of chaos and majestically watches over a universe that is called to rest. This was very important to a people with no homeland, no sanctuary.

Seeing God does not require a temple.

Seeing God requires rest.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of the Sabbath this way:

“The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world...The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere.” (*Talking about Genesis*, 1996:29,30)

This past year and a half has been a virus-imposed Sabbatical for many of us. We have worked from home, worshipped from home, taken a step back and a step away. We have seen evil and we have seen goodness. We have seen the ways that we can take care of each other. We can recognize the sacredness we have too often ignored. And we have given thanks. Remember that God made it all (and all of us) good.

The God we follow is not one who begins with violence. The God we follow is the one who starts out making everything good, including all people. If we get back to this kind of creation, then we are truly seeing a different kind of God, a different view of humanity. And it is good.

Beloved friends, as we continue to recreate ourselves and our world, take some time during the chaos of our lives and remember that God is there nudging you toward wholeness. This month, enjoy the energy of a new school year and all that it brings. Enjoy being outside where there is a crispness to the air. Enjoy the fact that long brown grass has turned green and that leaves will soon turn brilliant colors as the days get shorter. We'll take our fleeting opportunities to picnic and breathe outside air without masks before we succumb to inside air and what it might carry. Stop and take notice of the beauty of a loved one, your neighbor, or even a stranger on the street. And remember that amidst all of the chaos and confusion of life, God is there reminding us of the goodness of creation.

God is there calling people good.

God is there bending the long arc of history toward justice.

God is there as close as a whisper, nudging us and reminding us, it was good and it could be good again. We don't have to succumb to the gods of chaos and violence or

those who speak for God in oppressive and abusive ways. “It was good,” says God. Let us make it good again.

And when we are in chaos—When women’s rights are scorned by the Texas legislature and ignored by the majority of the Supreme Court;

When people of color are continually scapegoated;

When Afghan refugees flee their homeland for their very lives;

when floods and fires devastate the known landscape—

God looks to us. And nudges us forward.

In this chaos, what can we create that is good?

Here’s a clue, when we do something good, we are joining in God’s creative and life-saving process.

“On the Sabbath day,” we might imagine the story continuing, “the people gathered together and for an hour or so, they recognized the good in creation and in each other. Inspired by that goodness, they decided to have better and more healthy relationships.

They decided they had the power to affect change in their lives and in the lives of others.

They chose to think of others not as enemies, but as people in need of healing as they had been at one time.

They started to dream dreams.

They cleared their eyes.

And they decided to make it good from then on.

And God looked down on all that God had created and said, “They’re getting it. They’re finally getting it.” And it was very very good.”

Amen.