

“And It Was Good”

Sermon from Genesis 1, selected verses

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for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. But the earth became chaos and emptiness, and darkness came over the face of the Deep - yet the Spirit of God was brooding over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Light: Be!” And light was. Evening came and morning followed - the first day.

Then God said: “Now make an expanse between the waters - separate water from water!” So it was. Evening came and morning followed - the second day.

Then God said, “Waters under the sky: be gathered into one place! Dry ground: appear!” So it was. And God saw that this was good. Then God said, “Earth: produce vegetation - plants that scatter their own seeds, and every kind of fruit tree.” So it was. And God saw that this was good. Evening came, and morning followed - the third day.

Then God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky! Separate day from night!” So it was. God made the two great lights, then God made the stars as well. And God saw that this was good. And evening came, and morning followed - the fourth day.

God then said, “Waters: swarm with an abundance of living beings! Birds: fly above the earth in the open expanse of the sky!” And so it was. God saw that this was good, and blessed them. Evening came and morning followed - the fifth day.

Then God said, “Earth: bring forth all kinds of living souls: cattle and things that crawl and all kinds of wild animals!” So God made all kinds of animals, and God saw that this was good. Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, to be like us – stewards of all of this.” Humankind was created as God’s reflection. God blessed them, and entrusted them with all that is. And God looked at all of this creation, and proclaimed that this was good – very good. Evening came, and morning followed – the sixth day.

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A quick vocabulary lesson: “tov” is the Hebrew word for “good.” In her book *The Very Good Gospel*, Lisa Sharon Harper explains that the word does not refer only to the goodness of an object itself; it also refers to the ties between things. In the Hebrew conception of the world, she writes, all of creation is connection. The well-being of the whole depends on the well-being of each individual part.” This is different from the Greeks – whereas they understood perfection to be located within an object itself, so a thing, or a person, strove toward perfection, Hebrews understood goodness to be located between things; the original hearers of this text would’ve understood “tov” to refer to the goodness of the ties and relationships between things in creation. And it was good, and it was good, and it was good.

And then there’s the “very good” at the end of this story. “Very good” – “tov me’od” might be better read as vehemently good, forcefully good, abundantly, overflowingly, never-endingly good.” Not just very good.

Like, extravagantly good. That's what the whole of it is. Extravagantly good.

So, for a people who come out of captivity, a people who come out of exile, who knew there only a brutal story, a story of broken ties, a lived experience of disconnection - for those people to begin to tell this story: of chaos and then God, of swirling, churning waters and then God, of the world born from words, and not from violence - they're not only telling a new story of the world's making; they're giving themselves the chance to remake a world.

There early on where the Spirit of God is moving over the face of the waters - brooding over the deep, like a hen over her eggs - Harper writes, "It is as if God's spirit positions herself to confront the misery and destruction, the sorrow and wickedness. She broods over it as if she is about to do battle with the darkness. Her strategy for engagement is birth - new life." God speaks, and life is called forth - light and land and seas and trees and birds and all we know as wild and us - all of it, all of us, coming into being, answering this call of life itself.

The Hebrews storytellers said, "That's what we're born from! Not brutality, but brooding. Not slaughter but speech." They have known cruelty, maybe enough to believe it to be written into the very order of things, but they also look around and see a kind of patterning, a way in

which all things offer themselves to each other, and then this other question arises:

What if life liked us? What if whatever this power is that is beyond us, this force that is not our own that called us into being - what if it wanted us to thrive? What if it looked on us and smiled?

Cynthia Rylant's poetry collection, *God Got a Dog*, imagines this in a poem titled "God Went to Beauty School."

He went there to learn how
to give a good perm
and ended up just crazy
about nails
so he opened up his own shop.
"Nails by Jim" he called it.
He was afraid to call it
Nails by God.
He was sure people would
think he was being
disrespectful and using
his own name in vain
and nobody would tip.
He got into nails, of course,
because he'd always loved
hands -
hands were some of the best things
he'd ever done
and this way he could just
hold one in his
and admire those delicate
bones just above the knuckles,

delicate as birds' wings,
and after he's done that
a while,
he could paint all the nails
any color he wanted,
then say,
"Beautiful,"
and mean it.

What fills you with a sense of goodness and delight? When I ran that question by a church member earlier this week, he immediately said, "Ice cream!" and then he laughed and said, "I suppose that's not a very church-y answer."

First, I don't know what's a more church-y answer than some mention of food, but second, what if the "good" here - the delight God takes in all of creation, and in each of us - what if that "good" isn't the same as nice, or obedient, or expected? What if the "good" that God keeps celebrating here in the creation story, that our ancestors wanted us to remember and know - what if that goodness is something like spontaneous delight? What if that's what creates the connectedness that is the cause for celebration at the close of the creation story? What if that connectedness is the delight we offer to and draw from one another?

Thomas Merton said, “the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres - the sun and the moon and the stars - the silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast.”

The whole of it is invitation.

In Bible Study on Friday, we learned that there is one translation of the Bible - Young’s Literal Translation, from Scotland, in the 1800s - that messes with the tense of this story. Instead of saying that God *created* the world, and it *was good*, Young tells us that God *creates* the world, and it is *good*.

And don’t you know that to be true, just from your own vantagepoint of being alive in the world? Isn’t it the case that some new beauty is always being born, or at least, revealing itself to your eyes?

The mystic James Finley says this is the gift and delight of creation, this is its goodness: that the infinite presence of God is pouring itself out in immediacy, always, in the presence of others - the gift and miracle of our very presence, that whenever we encounter any created thing, not least of which, each other - we are standing there, sitting there, lying there, in the presence of God, pouring itself out for us, delighting us, delighting in us.

I don't know how we respond to this except to say yes, except to say *thank you*. To try to orient our lives in some kind of openness to it. To know ourselves as creators, too, like in the sense of that old monk, who opened every day with the prayer: God, what are you and I going to make together today, of this thing you've created, and called my life?

Amen.