

## **And It Was Very Good**

**Psalm 8                  Genesis 1:1-5 and 24-31**

In summertime, with all of the beauty and fruitfulness of the earth around us in this part of the world, it's good to reflect on, and remember to be grateful for, the goodness and abundance that surrounds us. And, to remember the goodness that is *within us* and... the goodness that *is us*. The *very goodness* that is us.

We are created in the image of God, a simple but easily forgotten truth, and I'd like us to reflect on that this morning as we prepare for communion. And, this will, in a way, launch us into our summer sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit. Stay tuned!

Before I read from Genesis 1, a brief comment: our 21<sup>st</sup> century mind wants to read this creation account scientifically. When we read it, we are tempted to ask, "How did he do that?" It's a good question. Scientific curiosity is a good thing, and science is our friend. Thank God for scientists and scientific discovery! It produced vaccines, for example, that have saved lives for decades, including most recently during the covid 19 pandemic.

But this is not the question that the creation account invites us to ask. We are not invited to ask whether creation took a literal six days or not, whether it's evolution or not, or "How long exactly *did* it take?"

The writer of our narrative accounts in Genesis frame the creation story in such a way that the questions it solicits from us are: **Who** did that? And **Why** did they do that? And we'll see it's "they" and not just he or she or an it. We are invited to reflect on all of this relationally, and artistically, the way we would enjoy a painting and want to know more about the artist. With wonder and awe, rather than technique.

Remember when Jesus stilled the storm in the boat with the disciples? After Jesus calmed the storm, none of them said, "Whoa, that was cool; how did you do that?" What they asked was, "Who is this guy?!?" And they were in awe and wonder at his power over creation. That's the same sense of wonder that we are invited to have when we read the first chapters of Genesis. Who did this? And why? What does this mean for us and for all of creation?

It's the sense of awe that David has in Psalm 8. In that psalm, as in others, David doesn't ask 'how did the stars come to be?' He simply says, "Wow." And he reflects on us and all of creation in relation to this amazing, creative God. How

can God be so mindful of us, given God's greatness and how inconceivably big God is? With that in mind, let's listen to the very first verses of the Bible...

### **Genesis 1:1-5**

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Now to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> days of creation. After forming land and sea and vegetation and animals...

### **Genesis 1:26-31**

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

God said (to them), "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon 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 air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

This is the word of the Lord!

This morning we are reflecting on the goodness of creation. The inherent goodness of creation, with specific attention to the fact that human beings are

created in God's image, whom God called "very good." The other days of creation are simply called good—which is good! Only on the 6<sup>th</sup> day when human beings are created does God call us "very good."

I want to plant a thought in your mind this morning, and let it germinate and grow in your subconscious: that you are *very good* in God's eyes. That you have great worth and value. Do you believe in the very-goodness of yourself, as a person created in the image and likeness of God?

As we heard, in the very first verses of the Bible, as God speaks creation into existence, God says "let there be light, and there was light; and God saw that the light was good." This one line, "God saw that it was good" establishes the first connection between creation and joy. Between the Creator and delight in their creation. This affirmation of goodness will be repeated six times in chapter 1 of Genesis, at the end of every creative day.

The goodness of light—and of everything—reminds us that our world was created by design, and with intention, not by random accident—even if God used something like the big bang to accomplish it. We need not be threatened by scientific discoveries like that. Again, the writers of Genesis want us to reflect on the who and why questions, the relational questions; so we don't have to be

threatened by scientific discovery. Many scientists will say there is design; intelligent design.

Unlike the first accounts of creation from the earliest of ancient cultures, the world of Genesis is not a capricious byproduct of two gods making war, or making love (as in some ancient accounts, one of which explains creation coming into being through a kind of cosmic domestic violence, as a male god and a female god get into a nasty fight which produces the world)—Genesis isn't an account like that, but of one eternally existing God who creates a good world for all creatures to live in, and who finds joy and satisfaction in their creation. The word "Eden" in Hebrew means "delight." The garden of Eden is the garden of *delights*. That's how good it is. And, that's how intentional it is on the creator's part. By the way, in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament there is no word for "nature." That word doesn't exist in their language. It's all "creation" or some form of creation language, which assumes a creator, who delights in their creation.

The beauty of this account is that the entire creation is suffused with hope, and possibilities. And this wonderful and caring design by which God creates the world is an important starting point for *our* identity and self-understanding.

Because on the 6<sup>th</sup> day God says, “Let us make humankind in our image.” And here, we notice the plural on God’s part. The trinity is already present at creation. God says let us make them in our image, in our likeness. And it’s plural on the human part too (let us make *them* in our image). Part of the goodness of creation is the relational & community aspect of it: God as relationship. And humanity as relationship. And the invitation to union and communion with the triune God; with creation itself; and with one another.

I want us to ponder this truth: you and I and all human beings are created in the triune God’s image and likeness. Therefore, how can there not be an inherent goodness, a very-goodness, to who you are.

Now, I can hear my serious Calvinist/Reformed theology friends saying, “But Genesis 3! Original sin! The fall!” Where Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and are banished from the garden and seem to ruin humanity for all time and eternity. And there goes our original goodness. My simple response to that is, yes, that is part of the story. But that isn’t where the story begins, and it isn’t where the story ends. It’s part of the story that attempts to explain human weakness and willfulness, but it doesn’t have to define us—it *doesn’t* define us. The Bible begins with Genesis chapter 1, not chapter 3.

In the Reformed/Calvinist tradition, and many other traditions, a lot of emphasis has been placed on original sin, “total depravity” and all that. What a wretch we are. If you’ve never heard of him, John Calvin is considered the founding father of the Presbyterian church. I call him the Thomas Jefferson of Presbyterianism, as he envisioned a form of church government that was representative, and not hierarchical. The government of the United States is largely based on his ideas (you may love him or curse him for that!).

He was a Reformation theologian, a brilliant lawyer, and... he was kind of a grouch—even if he did have many excellent interpretations of Scripture. I read a biography of him years ago and got the impression that John Calvin was not the kind of person you would invite to the pub for a beer and fun conversation; you’d invite Martin Luther to that.

John Calvin indeed wrote about things like original sin and total depravity. Yet, it doesn’t mean we are supposed to believe that we’re wretched people, or that God is mad at us or disappointed in his creation. Calvin simply pointed out that we need to be honest about our willfulness and the failings in our lives, so we can be fully aware of, and then fully receive and be grateful for, God’s grace. “Total depravity” is an unfortunate phrase because it doesn’t really convey what is meant. It’s simply a way of saying that we can’t save ourselves—in spite of our

best intentions and efforts. We need God's saving help. Which God is pleased to offer, and that we may gratefully accept.

But many who have studied Calvin tend to over-emphasize and dwell on his writings about sin and ignore another aspect of his understanding of human nature, based on his interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis: that there is inherent goodness to us, and in all of creation. Calvin actually addresses this, beautifully, but no one seems to want to talk about it. Except one young pastor I discovered...

Chuck DeGroot, a pastor of a Reformed (Dutch) church, wrote an article a few years ago titled "Dear Calvinist, you're not as bad as you think you are." He, like me, believes that we have overdone it with the emphasis on sin, and we have sometimes too quickly defined ourselves as "sinners" in our tradition. Sin is real, but it isn't the whole story. It has to be understood in light of our original goodness—our *very* goodness. Pastor DeGroot quotes directly from Calvin:

*"Humans contain within themselves enough miracles to occupy our minds... The gift of God's image is present in every person. This creational principle stresses the worthiness of the human being."*

Calvin continues: *"It is not the will of God that we should forget the primeval dignity which God bestowed on our first parents – a dignity which may well stimulate us to the pursuit of goodness and justice."*



That's beautiful. From a grouchy reformation theologian who we think only dwelt on how depraved human beings are.

Calvin took sin seriously, but he wasn't as serious about it as his followers make him to be. There is an emphasis on beauty and goodness and delight. The worth and dignity of every human being. Which stimulates us to justice!

Sin is real, and it's not to be taken lightly; indeed, it is part of the story from Genesis 3. And yes, there are parts of our lives and of the world that are messed up. Largely because God gave us free will, to choose our wills over his. However, let's not forget the foundation of creation—the inherent goodness of everything that God made, and the very-goodness of us humans being made in God's image. So, friends: you're not as bad as you think you are 😊.

I'd rather spend more time on original goodness than on original sin. Jesus sure seemed to. Jesus came, not only to forgive sin, but to re-form us and call forth the inherent goodness that God created in us. To make us the human beings that God created us to be, in all our glory and all our uniqueness. In 2Cor 5:16-17 (from our assurance this morning) Paul says: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new *creation*." Paul, a good Jewish thinker and believer, uses *creation* language to describe what Jesus has done, and who we are in Christ. He calls forth creation language. Not legal language that describes an impersonal

transaction, but artistic language to describe a God in Jesus Christ who is creative and who is creating newness in our lives. In Ephesians 2 Paul says, “We are God’s workmanship.” In the Greek of the New Testament, that can literally be translated as, “We are God’s work of art.” Think about that; you are a work of art! And maybe life has caused some damage to that artwork, but God is good at restoring art to its original design and beauty.

Along these lines, the reason we have confession (and assurance) in our worship service is not to ensure that you feel horrible about yourself on a weekly basis, because God delights in us feeling guilty and groveling before him, because it makes God feel big and powerful. No, *just the opposite*: we confess so that we are reminded on a weekly basis *that God loves us* and longs for our healing and wholeness and renewal. And wants to call forth the goodness that is in us.

And, our weekly confession and assurance reminds us that God, in Jesus Christ, set aside power, for our sakes. Jesus became human to remind us of the inherent goodness of our humanness. We are reminded on a weekly basis that it is safe to go to God with who we are, with all of our weaknesses and struggles, and yes, our sins, because sometimes we’re a mess and we know it. **And...** because God longs to be gracious to us.

Isaiah 30:18: *“The Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore, he will rise up to show mercy to you.”* The Lord waits... What is the Lord waiting for? God is waiting for us to be honest with him. God will be gracious and show mercy no matter what; but God’s graciousness is all the more a gift to us when we are open and honest in relationship with God. And not afraid, like Adam and Eve were...

Because in Genesis 3, after the “fall” it says that Adam and Eve tried to hide from God. It’s kind of humorous, actually. God says “Where are you?” as if God doesn’t know. And Adam says, “We heard you in the garden, and we were afraid, so we hid ourselves.” How true does that ring to you, in your experience? Being afraid of God, so you try to hide... because our belief is that God has a bad temper and delights in smiting us and sending people to the time-out corner for eternity. Naughty boys and girls that we are.

We don’t need to hide. God calls us out of the shadows and into the light because God longs to be gracious to us; longs to show mercy.

*That’s* why confession and assurance is important to us in our tradition. As you come to communion this morning, perhaps you can ponder a question: What is your core belief about who you are? Is your core belief that you are a child of God, created in God’s image and re-created in Jesus Christ? Or do you believe that you are inherently bad, or flawed? That your identity is “sinner.”

And as I've said before, whenever we have a thought in our mind about ourselves (and others too; but this morning I want us to reflect on how we think about ourselves)—whenever we have a thought about ourselves, we need to ask, “Does God agree?” about that thought? If I think I'm a uniquely flawed person, or I'm only a sinner... does God agree with that? Hint: the answer is no! We probably know that, but it helps to ask the question, to check our thinking.

But, I know, it's hard to get past what may have been spoken over us, by others or even by ourselves, over the years. And that is why we are invited to hear a new voice, and listen only to that voice, again and again, which says (to quote what God spoke over Jesus, our representative human, at his baptism): “You are my beloved child; with you I am well-pleased.”

How we think about ourselves, and *what* we think about ourselves, will naturally affect how we treat ourselves, and will flow out to how we think about and treat others. So, for our sakes, and for the sake of others, God wants us to know that we are his image-bearers; there is an inherent goodness, a very goodness, to who we are. That we have great worth and value, because God made us, and God is actively re-making us through Christ. That's our baseline, our starting place for our self-understanding. Rejoice in it, celebrate it, work to overcome the obstacles to believing it. And give thanks.