

Of all of the passages in our Bible,
I have probably read this one the most.

For starters, when I was quite young and had only a children's picture bible,
The illustrations of Adam and Eve were, well,
more interesting than some of the other illustrations
So I tended to turn to this story more often.

As an older child, I was determined to read through the entire bible, cover to cover.
Yup, some kids collected baseball cards,
others read every Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys book
I was the kid who had a fascination with the Bible.

Each time I undertook this endeavor of reading all of the Bible
I always began on page 1 with the Creation Story of Genesis.
(first in my red letter King James Version,
then in my black hardback Good News Version,
and finally in my leather bound NIV)

Sometimes, I would get through not only the story of Creation and then the Flood and then Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Esau... but maybe as far as the Exodus... before I'd run out of steam, and put it all down for such a long time, that when I finally came back to it, I felt compelled to start over at Genesis, Chapter 1.

In the eighth grade, age 13 or 14, I finally did complete my goal of reading the bible cover to cover.
I can say I did it.
But a lot of it I won't remember.
Genesis 1 I will remember.

This is a familiar passage.

It's a long one and yet most of it is familiar to us,

The phrases resonate, the figures of speech are clear

The images of what is unfolding are fixed in our minds as we hear the story.

It is a beautiful passage.

It is our story about our beginning

Meant to inform and inspire us

Meant to strengthen our faith and fill us with hope

Because this story is the first thing that appears in your bible,

You may assume it was written first in chronological order.

That somebody, Moses maybe, was going to tell the story

of the history of the Hebrew people

And that he started with the beginning and went from there.

Scholars don't think that's the case at all.

The "finished" books of the Hebrew Bible (the Xn Old Testament)

Were likely compilations of oral traditions from at least 4 main sources,

Edited and redacted over a thousand years or more

Told and retold, blended and merged

until they found their final form around the year 450 BC.

It is fascinating to study the clues from each of these ancient traditions that are still apparent

In the text we have today,

Different Hebrew names for God (Yahweh or Elohim)

Different details and emphases

Anyway, the scholarship surrounding the ancient texts is fascinating

But the story itself is just plain beautiful, I think.

The cosmic scale of the events

The vast list of characters (animals, plants, rocks and water, sun and moon)

The interaction between the Creator and the Creation.

There's only one big glaring problem with it for me:

So many people, so many Christians, want to fight about this passage.

Twice in the last 30 days people have tried to draw me into discussions,

well arguments, about Genesis 1

Dare I say the "e" word? Evolution.

While in Atlanta last week, my sister in law talked about a hidden agenda of a national group

That she believes is trying to destroy the Christian faith
through the vehicle of public school science textbooks.

And just a week before that, some of my coworkers struck up a conversation
about their religious beliefs regarding the end of the world
and somehow what one believes about the end of the world
and what one believes about the beginning of the world
got all tied up together in the discussion.

I did my best not to say anything in either of these conversations.

There was a day and a time that I relished a good theological debate.

I had a seminary professor (Bill Mallard) who not only taught us good theology

But prided himself on teaching us good "debate-winning" vocabulary.

He believed that if you could talk "over" someone's head

Then they would stop arguing with you

because they would think you were smarter than they were.

I did my best not to say anything in either of these discussions about Creation/Evolution,

even though I have a definite opinion and a lot of good vocabulary words I could've used

I didn't want to "get into it"

mostly because I am so tired of arguing about this passage.

Here we have this beautiful story,

This inspiring, uplifting, ancient text

affirming of humanity and all creation
and we (on all sides of the arguments) cite this text to prove our points
to bolster our positions
to pummel the opponents.
Rarely do we use to edify one another
Encourage one another
To give strength to ourselves and our neighbors on difficult days.

I know there are things worth arguing for
Principles and values worth standing up for.
I'm not advocating that we lay aside our call to speak up for what we believe
Or to let any and all theologies get lifted up without discernment.

But I am mourning that this beautiful scripture
This favorite scripture of so many children and adults
Is so rarely given time to be cherished, enjoyed, and taken to heart
Because as soon as it appears in a Sunday School lesson, a bible study, or a sermon
We immediately line up our defenses to launch at those
who read it differently than we do.

By the way, the person sitting beside you in the pew or two rows behind you
Probably reads this passage differently than you do.
Right here in this very sanctuary we probably represent a vast spectrum
of political and theological approaches to a text like this.

But I'm just not in the mood to argue this morning.

Today is Father's Day

It's also Trinity Sunday, a once a year holy day
Where we acknowledge we worship a God (one God) made known to us
in Three Distinct Persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit)
But it's also the Sabbath.
And the whole idea of a seventh day devoted to rest
comes from today's passage!

And since the concept of Sabbath is linked to the very creation of ourselves
and our surroundings in today's passage,
It only seems fitting to try to honor that Sabbath peacefulness this morning
As we approach the text.

So forgive me if I don't get on my soapbox
and tell you my precise position on evolutionary theory,
Public school textbooks, or the end of the world.

Forgive me if I don't try to arm you with new weapons
to launch at those with whom you disagree
Or if I don't inflame your zeal to cling tighter to the position you came with in the first place.
Forgive me if I don't call anyone a bad name,
insult neither your enemy's intelligence nor their faith...

This morning I simply want to talk about what is beautiful here,
What the writers may have wanted us to feel, to take in
What the Holy Spirit might want to move us to embody, to embrace.

Hopefully the 'three part' reading helped draw your attention
to the refrain that we too often miss.

Isn't the refrain so full of joy and affirmation...
AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD!

Light... God saw it and it was good.

How often do we notice the majestic simplicity of light

The beauty, the power... without it we couldn't live

The presence or absence or quality of light affects the way we see everything around us

Dry land... God saw it and it was good.

Fruit with the seed in it... God saw that it was good.

Fruit with the seed in it.

What a marvelous design.

The sun and the moon... Good.

Have you given thanks for the moon recently?

And yet isn't it beautiful in the night sky

Don't we get chills of excitement when we think of the moment Neil Armstrong set foot
on the moon

Or we dare to dream how our great grandchildren might themselves travel back and
forth routinely to the moon.

The sun and the moon, God said, are GOOD.

Sea monsters, birds, and swarms of creatures... Good.

Cattle, and creeping animals (I love that apparently important category)...

God saw that it was all good.

And then humankind...

in the image of God he created them,

male and female he created them

(no mention of a rib here in Gen 1,

of one gender being made after the other or for the pleasure of the other,

you'll have to read further in Genesis to find that version of Creation.)

But here God makes a man and a woman and takes a look at them

and at all of the rest of creation and saw that indeed

It was very good.

And then God rested.

This is a passage that reminds me that all that is around me is a God-given gift of beauty

This is a passage that reminds me that all of creation is special

That every grain of sand and every creeping beetle and every drop of rain

Has God's fingerprints upon it.

It is a passage that suggests an interconnectedness between all things

Purpose

And pleasure.

That refrain of "and God saw that it was good"

Just smacks of pleasure,

The satisfaction of an artist when she has contemplated all possibilities

And then applied a certain type of paint to a certain type of brush
and touched the canvas ever so precisely to see how it would look
Or a chef who has taken a fresh and wholesome ingredient and added just a hint of this
And a splash of that and then heated it until the fragrance was so delicious
That he just had to remove it from the heat and taste it...

God seems profoundly pleased with how each bit of creation came out.

Shouldn't we be pleased and take joy in one another

And with the beauty of the earth around us?

Take a look at your hands

See any veins or vessels protruding? Think they're unsightly?

They are beautiful, they are good! Think of the work those blood vessels do each day

Rushing oxygen to your cells, keeping you alive.

Look closely at the skin on your hands?

It probably looks different than it did 10 or 20 years ago?

Do you wish the pigment were darker... lighter?

Do you wish there were fewer wrinkles, no spots or scars...

Your skin is beautiful. It's the largest organ of your body... did you know that?

It holds everything in

Protects you from disease

Helps regulate your body temperature

Without it you would have no sense of touch.

Still think your hands are ugly or wish you could change them? ... don't!

They are good!

Look at your thumbs... Few mammals have an opposable thumb.

Ever tried to hold a fork or zip a jacket without your thumb.

Your thumbs are good.

So keep looking at your hands...

Veins, skin, thumbs...

Yours are not just like your neighbors

They are uniquely your own

A gift of God to you

derived from the gifts of your own mother and your father

their genes passed down in that powerful interconnectedness

we have with our parents

While you continue to look at your hands will you say these words after me...

And God said ... (and God said)

"IT IS GOOD." (it is good)

Oh, God looked at *all* of creation and said, "IT IS GOOD." (it is good)

Majestic mountains and goopy mud puddles

Furry puppies and rough old rhinos

A rumble of thunder or a song of a nightingale

It is good

It is good

It is good.

You are good

The earth is good

All of creation is good.

People who look like me are good

And people who look nothing like me are good.

Environments that are familiar to me (Appalachian Mountains, Mid Atlantic coast) are beautiful

And environments that are foreign to me are beautiful too

Tundras and deserts and rainforests and vast canyons

All of creation is good.

We can agree on this,

All of us, Christian and Jews who claim this story, this GOOD story, as our own

Can agree that Creation is good.

God said so, after all.

It means we were “Green” even before it was trendy to be so.

It also means that we have to take seriously the implications of what impact our behavior
Has on God’s good creation.

I almost wrote an entire sermon about how it’s Genesis 1
that forces us all to be environmentalists whether we want to be or not
But again, I recognized that even that can be a polarizing statement
In the political and social climate we live in.

And I want this sermon to be what it was intended to be
Not fighting words
But words that tell us who we are... whose we are...

Scholars believe that these verses were composed during the time that Israel was in captivity
In Babylon... the exile.

And the people of Israel were in exile so very long that they married and had children there
And their children were growing up hearing the stories of Marduk, the Babylonian God
Whom the Babylonians, of course, believed was far more powerful than Yahweh.
And the children would have heard stories of a variety of Gods each responsible for
different aspects of creation

So the elders of Israel needed to pass on the story of faith to their next generation.

The story in which there is One God.
One God who lovingly creates all things
And those things are carefully and wisely brought into being in an orderly fashion
And it was good.

Life in Babylon, for the people of Israel, wasn’t all that good.

They were captured as slaves
They were expected to take on the culture and religion and tradition
of their captors
They were expected to adjust to a new life, a seemingly chaotic life to them,

Without the rituals of the temple
Without the hallmarks of their faith
Without the celebrations and traditions that had given meaning
To their people for generations.

The children needed to know who they were and whose they were
They needed to know that out of chaos could become order
Out of darkness, there could come light
Out of seemingly nothing, could come something...
Because of the voice and breath of the One God of Israel.

And so the oral tradition that would be written as Genesis 1 became prominent.
The elders told the story to the congregation
And the parents took the story home and told their children
And their grandchildren and they told their children and they told their children...

The Creation story sustained the people of Israel
It helped them keep their faith and pass it on to their children in the midst
of captivity and difficulty.
Until they would be set free again and return to their homeland.

What does this story, this Good Story, mean for us?
Do we, like the captives of Babylon, live in chaos and darkness sometimes?
Do we worry that there is no hope for change in the world around us
No hope for the peace and the light that God has promised us?
Do we need to be reminded and to remind our children and grandchildren
That indeed we worship a God who can do the unimaginable
A God who can make SOMETHING out of NOTHING
Who can bring hope where there is despair
Light where there is darkness
Life where there is death.

This is a good story, a powerful story of faith for us today.

Try telling a friend or neighbor about how this passage can remind you
of the goodness of all that is around us
and about how it reminds us that even in our chaos and darkness,
God can speak the word that brings light and life, even today.

See if that friend or neighbor doesn't immediately try to talk about
either Creationism or Evolution.

If they do, stop them (try to, at least.)

And tell them you love this passage too much to argue about it.
And remind them that you love them too much to argue about it.
And that God loves us all so much that God has to be wishing
we'd all stop arguing about it.
And find our Sabbath rest.
And our Sabbath goodness.
And our Sabbath light, even in the midst of the darkneses that surround us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.