

What God Does – Creation and Providence

Genesis 1:1-28 and Romans 7:14-25

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Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Our sermon series about what Christians believe continues today – with a look at the work of God the father, the first person of the Trinity. We are now six weeks into the series, and you may be wondering when we are going to pick up the pace. Six weeks in, and we are still talking about that first person of the Trinity.

But fear not, next week we are going to look at Jesus, the second person of the trinity.

This week I want to look with you at God's work of creation and providence, and so we heard Thomas read Genesis 1. Now, we are going to hear the Apostle Paul reflect on what went wrong, how creation itself has been spoiled.

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

That reading from Genesis chapter one is a long one, I know, and Thomas and I talked about that. I thought about ways to shorten it.

And then, in the end, I decided that occasionally it would be good for us to hear those words, all of them. It would be good to hear the story of creation read straight through, from beginning to end.

It's a wonderful text. It has meaning and beauty. And though it should never be reduced to poetry alone, the themes and images are so strong and so compelling. In fact, I want to come back to one or two of them in a moment.

So much of what we know about God - what God intended for us, what God's design was for us - can be found right here in these verses.

On Christmas Eve 1968, many of you were not yet born, but I was a teenager and I remember that my family turned on the television set – which is not what we ordinarily did on Christmas Eve.

But this particular Christmas Eve was unusual.

Three men – three American astronauts – had entered lunar orbit with their tiny Apollo space capsule. And those three astronauts were Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders.

According to Frank Borman, who was the commander of the mission, the three astronauts were told before they left to say “something appropriate.” That was the extent of the instructions that they were given. They would be having, they were also told, the largest audience ever to listen to a human voice. Millions and millions of people all around the planet Earth would be listening.

And so, the three astronauts decided to take turns reading from Genesis chapter one, and it's astonishing when you think about it, hard to imagine something similar happening today.

These three men were engineers, scientists, test pilots. They were chosen for the mission not because of their deep faith, but because they were cool under great pressure. And it was unimaginable pressure. They didn't know, for example, if the rocket would burn at precisely the right moment and for precisely the right amount of time to send them back toward the earth.

Bill Anders started the reading, Jim Lovell came next, and then Frank Borman finished. And at the end of the reading, Frank Borman said, **“God bless all of you, all of you on the good earth.”**

So, nearly 50 years ago, three men decided that the most eloquent statement they could make from lunar orbit would be these words we heard this morning.

I cried, which is not all that unusual, but I cried. And I was as moved by that as I have ever been. Our family did not go to church that night, we always went on Christmas morning, but I felt as if I had been to church. It was truly stirring.

According to Genesis one, **“the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep.”** I like the way the King James Version puts it better: **“Darkness was upon the face of the deep.”**

“And then God said, ‘Let there be light.’”

And so, in the first verses of the Bible, the first two verses, we are introduced to a theme that will be repeated again and again throughout scripture – and that theme of course is darkness to light. First there is

darkness, nothingness, emptiness, void, deep silence, and then – suddenly – there is light, illumination, the beginning of something new.

In December we heard the words from the prophecy of Isaiah (chapter nine, verse two): **“The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.”**

I am struck every year on Easter that the day begins in darkness. The women set out for the tomb before the sun is up. Darkness in the Easter story stands for their grief and confusion and disbelief. They really had no idea what was happening. All they could think about was anointing that body and giving it a proper burial. As far as they were concerned, that would have been a good accomplishment for the day.

But then, suddenly, they are able to see that the stone has been rolled away. And as the sun continues to rise, they begin to understand what it meant, what Jesus had told them.

Frederick Buechner, an American pastor and writer, likes the story from John’s gospel which takes place after Easter, after the resurrection. The disciples are fishing in the dark on the Sea of Galilee, which is apparently a good time to fish (I wouldn’t know), but their nets are empty. And as readers, we are supposed to make the connection between darkness and empty nets. Futility and hopelessness.

But then, writes Buechner, they see someone standing on the beach. And at first they can’t make out who it is, because it is dark, but then they see that it is Jesus. And he is standing by a small charcoal fire, and he invites them to come and have a meal.

There are more examples I could give, but I will give just one more because I love these words and find them so inspiring. In the First Letter of Peter, we read, **“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God’s own choosing, so that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”**

What happens in creation is what happens over and over again in history and in our lives. Out of nothing at all, out of what is formless and void, frankly out of deep pain and misery and futility, God is able to call forth something new, something good, something unexpected.

Anne Lamott, who writes about the spiritual life, and who often uses striking language, likes to say that **“hope begins in the dark.”**

I wish it didn’t work that way, to be honest about it. But that’s the experience of my life and probably of yours as well. It’s in the dark places of our lives, surprisingly enough, where hope is born and where it begins to take shape.

I want to point out something else to you about the creation story, before we move on to providence, and I freely admit that we can’t say all that should be said about these verses in one sermon. But I want you to see that the creation story is told with a kind of rhythm.

The phrase **“it was good”** – you know, God looked and saw that it was good – this phrase occurs over and over again in the story, just like **“it was evening and it was morning, a second day, a third day, and so on.”**

So, at the end of each day, God looks at what he has made, and he says, **“Oh...it is good.”**

And what we are supposed to see or notice is that God takes delight in his creation. He is so pleased. It is in God’s nature to create – in many ways that’s who he is, that’s fundamental to his nature – and so this act of creation brings joy and delight and happiness.

If you’ve ever looked at the world under a microscope, or if you’ve ever seen photographs taken by the Hubble telescope, then maybe you can get a sense of the delight that God must have felt – to see his world teeming with life.

And then, after saying “it was good” five times, at the end of the first five days, God created human beings on the sixth day. And here, God changes his words slightly. In verse 33, it reads, **“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.”**

The world that God gave us, the world that God entrusted to us, was not just okay. (There is always someone in a crowd who likes to say, **“Well, I’ve seen better.”**) No, when God looked, it was so good, so pleasing, that it brought delight to him. I think that unless we understand this, unless we understand how good God thought creation was, that we can’t really appreciate what happens next.

Very soon after God rested from his work, creation took a devastating turn.

One more point before we move on. I used to ask confirmation classes why God created the heavens and the earth. I would be interested in your answer as well. Why did God do it? But the answer, invariably, from these fifteen-year-olds, was that God must have been lonely. God must have felt incomplete. God needed people around to keep him company.

There is a wonderful poem called “The Creation” by the African American preacher James Weldon Johnson – and if you’ve never seen it or heard it read aloud - I hope you will look it up. It would be worth your time. It’s really very good.

But the theology, I have to say, is a mess. And I’m afraid that it has influenced lots of people in the way they think about creation.

According to Johnson, God **“stepped out on space, and he looked around and said, “I’m lonely – [so] I’ll make me a world.”**

Just so you know, we believe that God is totally self-sufficient. God enjoys perfect fellowship within the Trinity. They enjoy each other. They like being together. I hate to put it his way, but God didn’t need me to make his life complete. That’s not what we believe.

What we believe is that God, in a sense, couldn’t help himself. He created because that’s what creators do. Think about this. What do poets do? What do singers do. What do artists do? They create. They express. And that, you see, is what we believe about God.

God creates because it is in his nature to create.

Let's move on because, as we all know, and as we are reminded every single day, something went horribly wrong. By Genesis chapter three, things had fallen apart. What was intended to be perfect and lovely and life-giving had become imperfect. Sin entered the world.

And for the second time in one sermon, I am going to remind you that I can't say everything about this that probably should be said, but I can say this much: Sin entered the world, and creation was spoiled, because of human rebellion against the creator.

It didn't take long for the human beings in the story to want more than they had, to doubt the words that the creator had spoken, to think they could figure things out for themselves. The first sin wasn't taking a bite out of an apple. The first sin was hubris – a wonderful old word which means arrogance, conceit, pride, an inflated sense of our own importance.

God created a world in which human beings had choices – what we like to call free will. And so they could choose to love. Or not. They could choose to follow – or not. They were free to enjoy what they had been given, but they decided to reach for more, what they had been specifically warned not to reach for.

Do you know something? I can't emphasize enough how serious this is. How serious sin is. What a terrible force or power it is in our world today.

Peter Kreeft, a Catholic theologian and philosopher, who teaches at Boston College, says that there are two major objections to Christianity. There are more, of course, but the others don't even come close in terms of seriousness. And one objection is that natural science seems to do a pretty good job of explaining everything without the need for a god, and two, the second objection, is the problem of evil.

If God is so good, why is his world so bad? If an all-good, all-wise, all-loving, all-just, and all-powerful God is running the show, why does he seem to be doing such a miserable job of it?

The answer, according to believers down through the centuries, is that we have only ourselves to blame. You can blame it on Satan, the “enemy” who tests us and plays with our minds and who pushes us to do what we know we shouldn't, but in the end there is no one to blame but ourselves.

In Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter seven, we read about Paul's own inner wrestling. If you have never read these words before, I encourage you to go back and re-read them. Please keep going and read chapter eight as well for some good news.

But in chapter seven, Paul wrestles with this terrible and insidious and awful thing called sin. The good we want to do? We can't do it. And the bad we want to avoid? We can't seem to do that either. We are caught in a desperate situation, which only seems to get worse as we get older.

And if you were hoping I would say something about how things smooth out with age, I'm sorry to disappoint you. We wrestle with sin, I'm afraid, throughout our lives. The temptations do not go away. They change, they take on different forms, but they do not go away.

And so, we live – you and I – in this human predicament, and it's called sin.

John Calvin, a sixteenth century Reformer who lived most of his life in Geneva – John Calvin used to say that even our best efforts, even those times when other people are impressed by how good and loving

we are, even in those times, he said, our motives are twisted. We appear to be doing good, but even then we can't do it purely. Calvin's followers called it Total Depravity. Capital T! We are a mess. Human beings are a mess.

If you don't believe me, turn on the news. I find it difficult to do it these days, but I can't help myself. Like sin, I do it over and over again. The world is a frightening place, so out of control. But I watch anyway, as though I need more evidence to convince me that things are not the way they were meant to be.

And if you think I am exaggerating about how bad things got so quickly, look at Genesis chapter 4. Cain murdered his brother Abel. Oh my goodness. Cain – filled with jealousy and rage – lured his younger brother out into the field one day and clobbered him.

How was it possible to go from a creation that was good and just and so full of hope... to a creation where murder seems like a reasonable solution to sibling issues?

Now, I can't end today without leaving you with some hope. That would be irresponsible. And the truth is, there is a great deal of hope in the Bible.

Next week, when we talk about Jesus we will see God's rescue plan unfold – it will be on full display – but already in Genesis, before any human beings thought of a Messiah, God began to lay the foundations for a rescue.

God began to make covenants with his people. God – this is the critical point – it was God who took the initiative over and over again to set things right. That is the story of the Old Testament.

Here is what I want to say today more than anything else: because God is so in love with his creation, because God is so in love with you and me, because God takes such delight in our world (in spite of everything), God is determined to set things right. That's what we believe. That's the summary of our faith. Without that hope we have nothing. Without that hope we live in darkness.

What is wrong will be set right. What is unjust will be set right. What is ugly and cruel and violent will be restored to the way it was meant to be.

That's the faith I have embraced for myself and for my family. That's the reason I can get up in the morning and face each new day, in spite of the headlines I read.

So, tell me this: what is your hope? Where are you placing your trust? What is the other alternative here?

I can't wait until next week.