

4 March 2018

The Good Creation of Pleasure
Genesis 2:4-9; Psalm 104:1-4, 14-15

In Genesis 1, we read an account of the grand sweep of creation, but in Genesis 2 we find a more down-to-earth approach. We read Genesis 2, verses 4-9:

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—⁷then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And how are we, the descendants of the first man and woman to respond to this “pleasant” creation? With joyful thanks. We read now from Psalm 104, verses 1-4 and 14-15:

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul.

O LORD my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honor and majesty,

² wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,

³ you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,

you make the clouds your chariot,

you ride on the wings of the wind,

⁴ you make the winds your messengers,

fire and flame your ministers.

¹⁴ You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,

and plants for people to use,

to bring forth food from the earth,

¹⁵ and wine to gladden the human heart,

oil to make the face shine,

and bread to strengthen the human heart.

In a beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formlessness and chaos and darkness was over the face of the deep, but the Spirit of God – ah, she was there, brooding over the face of the waters. And God said “Let there be light,” and there was light, and it was different from darkness. And God said, “Let there be a space of stillness in the middle of the chaos” and God pulled apart the watery abyss and made a space. Then God said, “Let there be land in the space that has been set apart from chaos, and let there be plants and trees on the land, and let the plants produce their own seeds to continue creating themselves anew.” And it was so,

and God smiled. It was good. So then God scattered the stars and planets about the sky and made birds to fill the air and fish and sea monsters to fill the seas – all this in five days. On the sixth day, God said, “Now, let there be creatures on the land, crawlers and creepers and runners and climbers. And let them all produce their own seed and continue my creation. And now let us make one more creature, one with a divine spark, one that can appreciate creation as we do and care for it.” And God made us, male and female, and God smiled again. “It’s good. No, it’s *very* good.” And then God rested.

This is the account of creation found in Genesis 1, and as familiar as it is, you might not realize how remarkable it is. Every ancient culture has a creation story. Many of them are similar to each other. But there is nothing, anywhere, remotely like this. In Greek myth, the earth is created as a by-product of war between the Titans. In Babylon, too, war is the background to creation. Tiammat, God of the Sea, criticizes a younger god named Marduk and his friends with their loud music, so Marduk cuts Tiammat in half. The top half of Tiammat forms the dome over the earth, and the lower half becomes the sea beneath the earth. In Persian religion, earth is a battleground between a god of light and a god of darkness. In one ancient myth, the earth was created when a god sneezed. Creation in Genesis 1, by contrast, is intentional – God chooses to create, apparently, because God prefers order to chaos, and would rather have something than nothing. This creation is peaceful – God speaks calmly, and what is spoken becomes so. Finally, creation here is beautiful – God surveys creation and repeatedly declares it good, concluding in Genesis 1:31 that it is very good. God delights in it.

There is only one other ancient creation story that shares that peaceful tone. It’s the one in Genesis 2, that we read from earlier. This story is a more earthy account of creation. Here, God doesn’t just speak things into being but makes them by hand. God creates the first man by scooping up mud and molding it into shape and then breathing into it. So the details are different. But here, too, creation is intentional (just because God wanted to) and peaceful (with the peace of a sculptor creating art) and beautiful (for the newly created man, God planted a garden and made sure that it was *pleasant to the sight and good for food*). So, again, compared to every other creation story that humans have composed and told for themselves, this feels unutterably alien. There’s nothing like it. This is the voice of God.

An aside here, not really a part of my sermon, but I can’t let it pass. As most of you know, these chapters of Genesis have been surrounded by controversy ever since science has shown us a different picture of the origins of the universe – billions of years instead of six days, humanity evolving over millions of years instead of made in a moment, and so on. Let me remind you of a basic rule for understanding and interpreting any written text. You have to understand first what sort of writing it is, for what purpose, and then you have to avoid treating it as if it were something else. For instance, the poet Shelley wrote the ode “To a Skylark.” If you read it as a poem, it’s pretty good. If, however, you’re using it as research for a report on the feeding and nesting habits of English birds, it’s worthless, filled with inaccuracies. If you don’t care for poetry, you don’t have to read Shelley. But if you do read Shelley, don’t judge his work by the standards of scientific writing. To read a text well is to read the text *as it is intended to be read*. Well, Genesis 1 is a theological poem, and Genesis 2 is a theological parable. Both are designed above all to describe the nature of God. Neither has the slightest interest in the actual process or timeline of the universe’s origins. If you want to understand the nature of God, start here. As I said, this is the voice of God. But remember that this is the voice of God singing a song, not presenting a paper.

Thank you. We now return to our regularly scheduled sermon. As we have seen, Genesis describes God creating in peace, shaping order from chaos, intentionally making things beautiful and pleasing to the senses. We get a picture of God as an artist, or even as someone playing a beautiful game. And those pictures of God are unique among religions. So what should our response to God's creation be? Enjoy it. Love it. Taste it. Preserve it for others to enjoy.

You see, God not only made waterfalls and sunsets and birdsong beautiful, but God also made us with the eyes and imagination to recognize and appreciate that beauty. God not only made strawberries and cream and apples and sugar and grain and cinnamon pleasing to the taste, but God also created us with the senses to appreciate those tastes and the creative imagination to put them together and make apple pie and strawberry shortcake. So, if from the beginning the earth was designed to be pleasurable, and we were designed to experience that pleasure, then let us do so with hearts filled with gratitude. Remember our reading from Psalm 104: *You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.*

Now you would think this would be the easiest of all God's commands – go out and enjoy stuff. Apparently it isn't, though. Remember last week I talked about how Paul preached a gospel of grace and freedom from rules, and within a few years the people who had embraced that good news were eagerly adopting a brand new set of rules to impose on people? Our human perverseness is such that no matter what good gift God gives us, we find a way to corrupt it. I don't know if this qualifies as Original Sin, but it's at least Original Self-Destructive Behavior. We find ways to corrupt every good pleasure. God gives us good and delicious and healthy food to eat; we invent gluttony and eating disorders and artificially flavored food without nutritional value. God invented sex and made it pleasurable; we invent rape, sexual abuse, pornography, and expressions of sexual desire that exploit and dehumanize other children of God. God creates grapes and the natural process of fermentation – remember Psalm 104's gratitude for *wine that gladdens the human heart* – we invent alcoholism. God invents plants with medicinal properties; we invent drug addiction. God invents birdsong and the whistle of wind and gives us the ability to hear and love music; we invent polka.

Okay, that last one might be debatable, so cancel that. But look at the others. In every case, what we humans have done is similar. We have taken a simple pleasure that God has given us, and we have either intensified it or twisted it and made it into an idol – for instance, the cruel, consuming idolatry called addiction – and in the process have destroyed the pleasure. The glutton no longer enjoys food, but craves it. The alcoholic has long since forgotten the pleasure of a glass of wine but now only seeks to fulfill a need. Every pleasure on earth – that's God. Every perversion of that pleasure – that's us.

And so, how has the Church of Jesus Christ responded to humanity's corruption of earthly pleasures? By banning pleasure. We have too often become sourpusses that assume that anything enjoyable must be wrong. Dancing, dessert, sex, the music that those kids listen to, you name it. And so, in our own very special way, we followers of God have been just as active in destroying God's pleasures as everyone else.

Can we not? Can we, during this Lenten season, remember that God thought the world was really cool and created us to share in its delights? To do this, we must start by remembering that pleasures are best enjoyed in moderation. Excess destroys pleasure, so enjoy God's creation

within limits. Second, remember that for some of us, the limits are rigid. I have diabetic or celiac friends who cannot enjoy some foods. I have alcoholic friends who cannot have even one drink. But God's bounty is such that there are pleasures enough for all. Don't think about what you can't have – that's how Christians become tight-lipped Puritans. Think about the rest of God's bounty. Think about the smell of baking bread, walking with someone you love and holding hands, chocolate, chicken curry, sex, Rachmaninoff's cello sonata, fresh strawberries with cream, beer-battered cod, sitting in front of a fire on a cold day, holding a new baby, kissing, drinking thick coffee at a campfire on a cool summer morning, playing with a puppy, drinking mountain-grown tea on a sunny deck in the late afternoon . . . that sort of stuff. God meant for us to enjoy it. So enjoy all you can.

Even, if you must, polka.

*(Note: After our 10:00 service this morning, of **course**, Jennifer Lohmann, our pianist, played a polka for our postlude.)*