

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

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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 a wind from God swept 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.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

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, “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.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

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

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It was good, it was good, it was good, it was good, it was good, and indeed, it was very good. Over the next seven weeks, our theme is “Caring for God’s Creation.” We’re doing this at a time when it’s becoming clear that the earth is facing an acute crisis, and that humans are the primary cause. Our existence and the existence of millions of other species are in imminent danger. We’ll be talking about that. We *have* to talk about that. But that’s not what we’re focused on today.

Today, we go back to the beginning, to where it all started. Where it started was with God—and with God’s repeated assessment after each new phase of creation: *It is good*. So we begin our conversation with the reminder that creation was God’s action, that this is God’s world, and that everything in it, including us, was created good.

That’s easy to forget. I’m a Presbyterian and, therefore, a Calvinist, which means that I can have a pretty dim view of human nature. For that matter, I read the news. What strikes me, over and over, is how easy evil is. One person with hate in their heart and an automatic weapon in their hands can destroy countless lives and hijack the agenda of a nation—at least, for a day or two. One oil rig with irresponsible management and inadequate regulation can create an environmental disaster of epic proportions, with ripple effects that go on for decades. One match in a California desert can set off a blaze that destroys lives and towns and habitat over hundreds of miles. Evil just seems so easy.

But there’s a reason that evil grabs the headlines; because goodness isn’t news. It isn’t news, because goodness is so basic, so ordinary, it’s just part of the ground we walk on and the air we breathe and the water that flows in our rivers and streams and taps. Goodness is the default mode of God’s creation—even God’s human creation, but it’s so ubiquitous that we forget to notice it.

One of the gifts, for me, of moving to Alabama, has been the incredible biodiversity that we have here. I had no idea! I'm fascinated by the foliage of plants I've never seen before; insects that must have dropped in from outer space—and then swallowed some steroids; birds that, even though they are familiar species, have slightly different coloring than I've seen in other places. And here's a fun bird fact: I heard years ago on NPR that the same bird species in different regions of the country sing in a slightly different dialect. I'm pretty sure the mockingbirds in our yard end every twittered phrase with "y'all."

Goodness. You can smell it in the dampness of the soil after a rain; you can hear it in the rush of the waterfall at Turkey Creek; you can taste it in the fresh peaches on a Saturday morning at Pepper Place.

And you can see it, too, in one another, in ways that will never make the news. You can see it in the dad with the *Born to Be Wild* tattoo on his arm playing Barbies with his daughter on the airplane. You can see it in the elderly man who cares for his wife day after day even though, some days, she doesn't even remember who he is. You can see it in the next-door neighbor you only barely know, who comes over to mow your yard because they notice you're on crutches. You can see it when you're trying to turn out of this back lot at the end of the day when 22nd Street is just one, long stream of traffic, but you just wait, because you know that some random driver will pause to let you in—and one always does.

Goodness. The theologian Paul Tillich referred to God as "the Ground of all Being," and God is good. So, before we focus on the destruction, and the huge task we have ahead of us, we have to remember the goodness. It's the goodness that makes the earth worth saving.

When we lived in California, our house had a concrete patio in the backyard that had been there for years. There was a crack in that patio—it was narrow, but every year, there was a lily that pushed its way up through that crack to bloom. It was always around Easter time (which made for a great children's sermon!), and I always marveled at it. That bulb had to have been in the ground before the patio was poured, and it got almost no light, but every year, it pushed it way up through the darkness and the gravel and the jagged concrete, and bloomed.

Light and darkness, sea and dry land, swimming creatures and flying creatures and crawling creatures and creatures on two legs—in spite of all the damage, goodness

is still planted in every part of creation and every one of us. We see it every day, fighting its way to the surface, and blooming. Evil may be easy, but goodness is persistent and it is pervasive, and it is so, so precious.

Today is Trinity Sunday, when we honor the triune mystery that is God. How God can be both three and one isn't a question of math, but of relationship. Father, Son, Holy Spirit; or Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer--because God is Trinity, there is both an unbroken connection and a constant movement, so that God's love isn't static, but always flowing, and even overflowing to create all the beauty that we see in this world. Creation comes from that flow of love, extending outward, embracing inward. And what comes from a good and loving God can't help but be good, itself; can't help but bring delight to its Maker.

To say that creation is good is to say that it has value in and of itself--not because of what it can do for us, but simply because it is.

Yesterday, when we gathered at Turkey Creek for Vacation Bible School, we learned that it is the only place in the world where the Vermilion Darter is found. The Vermilion Darter is a tiny, brightly-colored fish. Could the world survive without it? Probably. But consider God's delight in the particular beauty of that specific outgrowth of creation. "It is good," God says of the Vermilion Darter. Who are we to dismiss or destroy what God declares good?

We are, indeed, in a fight for our own survival, and the survival of our ecosystem--but survival is not the greatest reason to change our behaviors, since no one of us survives forever, anyway. No, the greatest reason to care for and treasure this creation is that that is how God sees it: as a treasure.

We have hard work before us, no question: but it's good work, and, people of God: it's the work we were made for—to tend and delight in the goodness in this world and in one another. But we aren't working alone--all of creation serves as our partner, with goodness stubbornly pushing up through the cracks of destruction.

And the God whose Spirit first moved across the waters; who spoke the world into being through a Word; who dwelt among us as flesh and blood and declared this earthbound meal of grain and grape to be a conduit of holiness; continues to create and recreate here among us, declaring of this world, and even of us: It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very, very good.

