

GENESIS 1:1-25 (2)

THE GOOD SETTING OF THE STORY

It is one thing to say it. It is another thing to sense it. It is one thing to believe it. It is another thing to experience it. It is one thing to agree to it. It is another thing to delight in it.

Jonathan Edwards said it this way: “There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness.” It is true about honey, and it is true about all of creation. We say, “The heavens declare the glory of God,” but we will only declare that glory from the heart when we sense, experience, and delight in that glory for ourselves.

Last week, we entered the first scene of the five scenes of our story: creation. We discovered a creator God who is personal, purposeful and powerful. We learned that his personality provides comfort, joy, peace and hope, that his purpose gives us reasons to live, and that his power both takes us down in humility, and lifts us up in strength.

Today, we move from the great Author of the story, to the good setting of the story. We turn our thoughts from the Creator to the creation. I wish we could have this service by a beautiful lake, or near a majestic mountain, or even on the front lawn of the church, because while we can say what we say, believe what we believe, and agree to what is agreeable about creation, I want us to sense, to experience, and to delight in the glory of creation today. May God’s Spirit, who was present at creation, give us this grace, inside this room.

So what can we say about the good setting of the creation? It is good, you know. All through Genesis 1, we read that God creates, and that God declares his creation to be good. But what is so good about it? Let me offer you two phrases. It is good because everything is the same, and it is good because nothing is the same.

It is good because **EVERYTHING IS THE SAME**. The creation story reveals that God has created an orderly creation. This is good, because it means we can predict, and he will provide.

WE CAN PREDICT. As we read through these verses, words like this might come to mind: rhythm, continuity, regularity, predictability. Creation is predictable. Here are some examples.

God creates light and darkness. They come and go in the same pattern, day after day - even to this day. What would life be like if you never knew it was going to be light or dark at any given time? You plan to go outside and play a game of football - and all of a sudden it gets dark. Or you collapse into bed, ready for a long winter’s nap - and the sun starts to shine in your window at 2 a.m. Or you are walking in a neighborhood that is fine during the day, but a little nervy at night - and the light suddenly becomes darkness. Instead, each day is a mixture of light and dark, and even though the mixture changes throughout the year, we can predict it and plan for it.

God creates sky, land and sea - and a place for each of them. Since the fall of man into sin, there is erosion and there are disasters, as we have so painfully recalled this week with the earthquake in Haiti. But the land, sky and sea are generally stable. What would life be like if the sky, land and sea changed radically every day? What if you woke up one day, and you were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean? Or what if you woke up one day, and the Atlantic Ocean had washed over your home? Or what if Chicken Little was right, and you never knew if the sky was falling? The features of the world are set in place, and we can predict they will stay in place, day after day.

God creates vegetation, which will produce according to its kinds. Apples produce apples. Oranges produce oranges. Bananas produce bananas. What if apples produced oranges, or oranges produced bananas, or bananas produced apples? That sounds like fun - but what if your apple became a new fruit - and you couldn’t be sure whether it would nourish you or kill you? Or what if every kind of vegetation suddenly became ugly, tasteless, and poisonous? You don’t have to worry about that. You can predict what kind of food you will be able to eat.

Order is a blessing. God is a God of order, and the order of his creation reflects the order of his character. We may think predictability is dull, and sometimes it is. But part of the blessing of creation is the

predictability of creation.

Everything is the same. That means we can predict, and that means GOD WILL PROVIDE. As we read these words, we see God setting up an order that will sustain the creation - including the man and woman we will meet next week. Let's use the same examples.

God creates light and darkness in a way that provides for us. Light allows vegetation to grow, but darkness allows other parts of the world to have light, so that vegetation may grow in those places. Light and darkness provide ongoing cycles, so that we can be awake for a certain number of hours, and asleep for a certain number of hours. We are made to work, and we are made to rest. Both are blessings.

God creates the sky, land and sea in a way that provides for us. Their relationship regulates and moderates the weather we need to survive and thrive. If the sky poured down rain and snow all the time, we could not live. But if the sky provided nothing, we also could not live. The weather experts among us can explain this better than me, but the seas influence our weather in ways that create the climates we need and enjoy. Then there is the land. We can live here. We can work here. We can play here. God provides this.

God creates the vegetation. We need to eat. Vegetation grows regularly, and that allows us to harvest food, and it also provides food for the beasts of the earth and the birds of the air. Some places are more fertile than others. There are cycles of plenty and drought. But the earth is made to grow the food that allows the people of the earth to eat. Even with billions of people on the earth, God provides enough food. When we read of famine, the problem is not a shortage of food. The problem is man's failure to get the food where it is needed. Again, God provides.

Order is a blessing, and order is a necessity. Without the order of creation, we could not live in this creation. Life would be nothing but chaos. That may seem exciting for a while, but we would be controlled and consumed by that chaos.

Predictability and provision. This is the doctrine of providence. God has created the world so that he can and does sovereignly, wisely and powerfully preserve and provide for the creatures he has made. He has not made this world, then left us to ourselves. He has made this world, so that we can live here.

Think of "here" itself. Even the most ardent evolutionist has to admit that this earth is made for us to live here, and it is in a place that allows us to live here. If the earth were much closer to the sun, we would be fried. If the earth were much farther from the sun, we would be frozen.

This truth of providence is true for people of all nations, but we should be especially thankful for it. We live in a land of incredible natural beauty. We live in a land with a variety of climates. We live in a land of abundance. We have it so good, that we don't appreciate how good we have it. A while back, my wife received an email called, "What Is Eaten In One Week." You see pictures of families from around the world, posing with the food they will eat in a week. We have so much.

In God's good creation, everything is the same. We live with order. Yet also in God's good creation, **NOTHING IS THE SAME.** Genesis 1 reveals not just a God of order, but a God of variety, and this is also good! It is here that the music begins to play in our hearts. As we read about the first four days of creation, we read mostly about how the world functions. But then we reach verse 20: "And God said, 'Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the span of the sky.'" Then verse 24: 'And God said, 'Let the land produce creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.'"

Can you sense the music? Can you experience the entertainment? Can you delight in the running, dancing and playing? How about two young, strong lions wrestling with each other, or the breathtaking beauty of birds soaring and swooping here and there and everywhere, or a group of sea creatures rising and diving with indescribable grace?

In the creation, THERE IS LIFE IN ALL PLACES.

On the land, we have livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals.

In the sky, we have birds.

In the sea, we have living and moving things, great and small.

What would creation be like, if we did not live on the land with dogs and cats and squirrels and rabbits and hamsters and lions and tigers and elephants and lizards and countless other creatures? Because sin has entered the world, we do sometimes struggle with those other creatures. But as creatures, they are delightful.

What would creation be like, if we could not see the creatures in the sky? What joy do we have when we see a beautiful redbird, or a bird with feathers as yellow as the sun, or a bird that is as blue as the deep blue of the sea, or the majestic soaring of the eagle? Because sin has entered the world, we may struggle with those creatures! But as creatures, they are wonderful.

What would creation be like, if we could not explore the creatures of the sea? Have you ever thought about the amazing variety of fish? Have you ever been awed by the grace of the dolphin, the strength of the shark, or the size of the whale? Because sin has entered the world, we also struggle with those creatures! But as creatures, they are glorious.

There is life in all places. Even better, THERE IS LIFE OF ALL SORTS.

Again and again we read this phrase, "According to their kinds." This may be the neatest part of the entire Genesis narrative. What would life be like if every animal were a dog? What would life be like if every bird was red? What would life be like if the only kind of fish was the goldfish? They are all fine, but if all we had was one variety for the land, the sky and the sea, life would be dull. It would be too predictable. It would reflect a Creator who is intensely practical and infinitely able to provide, but hardly imaginative, hardly beautiful, hardly delightful.

Nothing is the same. There is life in all places, and there is life of all sorts. Do you sense this? Do you experience this? Do you delight in this?

Several years ago now, during our mission trip to Tanzania, we talked to some of the people about where Africans would go if they could visit the United States. What would we expect them to say? How about the Grand Canyon? How about the Smokey Mountains? How about Niagara Falls? How about a trip to Kansas, to see miles and miles of wheat waving in the wind?

I forget all the answers, but I think the first was Disneyworld. I also recall New York City, Hollywood, and Chicago. Even as we stood on the shore of Lake Victoria and marveled at the beauty, one of our hosts told us that Africans do not appreciate creation as they should.

Do you? Do I? Do we? Not just in what you say, or in what you say you believe, or in your agreement with my words. Do you sense how wonderful this is? Do you experience how wonderful this is? Do you delight in how wonderful this is? As we will discover as we move through the second scene of the story, creation has lost its purity. We do have to fight against it sometimes. But it is still glorious.

What does this mean for us? How does this touch our part of the story? I offer two words.

First, stewardship. As we will discover soon, man is given dominion over the creation. But dominion is not the same as domination. Dominion is stewardship. Domination is abuse. If we love God, we should care for his creation.

I realize that when I say that, I am mentioning an intensely political issue for our culture. We will struggle with what this means for politics and policy, and we may disagree. But if you are a believer in Jesus Christ today, you should be an environmentalist in the godliest sense of the word. You do not worship the creation, as some do. But you worship the God of creation, which means you are a steward of his creation.

The details of this could fill the whole day, but let's just ponder one simple example that has nothing to do with the politics of Washington, and everything to do with life in Richmond. Answer this: are you wasteful or wise about your use of God's creation?

I think of how I can stand at the kitchen sink and let water run and run down the drain. I think of how I may use so many disposable products that I need a second "Rosie Roller." I think of how I might use far too much paper in the church office. I think of how I am sometimes too lazy to recycle. I think of how I throw things out that may be useful to someone else. I think of how I occasionally pitch perfectly good food.

God made it, and he made it good. It has been affected by sin, but it is still God's creation. You say those are little things. They are. But in the little choices I make, I reveal a heart of wastefulness or a heart of wisdom about my stewardship.

The good setting of this story also touches our story in a second way. It not only leads us to stewardship. It leads us to worship. We talked a bit about worship last week, with our eyes set toward the personal, purposeful, powerful God of creation. As we see him for who he is, how can we not worship him?

Yet we ought to talk about worship again, this time with our eyes set toward his creation, where everything is the same, and nothing is the same. If we sense the goodness of the creation, if we experience the goodness of the creation, and if we delight in the goodness of creation, we will be so awestruck and so amazed that we will worship the God of creation.

Think about the image of honey again. If someone prepares a wonderful jar of honey for you, you will not just talk about the wonders of honey. Sooner or later (and probably sooner), you will dip a spoon into that honey and have a taste. Then, after you have enjoyed the sweetness of the honey, you will praise and thank the person who gave you such wonderful honey.

In the same way, we do not just delight in the creation. If we do, we may very well worship the creation, and that is idolatry - the worship of a false god. Instead, we use our delight in the creation to stir our delight in the Creator! We are blessed by the order he provides, and we enjoy the variety of God's creatures and creation, and we praise, thank and worship the God who provides a world where everything is the same, and nothing is the same.

This is especially true as we sense not just the glory of creation, but the glory of redemption. The whole story is a story of sin and corruption - a sin and corruption that affects even the creation. But the whole story is also a story of redemption - the story of a creating God who chose to redeem his creatures through the life, death and resurrection of his co-creating Son. Through faith in Jesus, we can see the creation in a new way, and we can see our Creator in a new way, and we worship him.

I love the story told by Pastor Skip Ryan about a boy with cerebral palsy, who would sit in the front row of Skip's church in Virginia, in a wheelchair. He would get excited in church, but he would react a little later than others. He would put his hands in the air and yell, "Wow, God!"

When we genuinely sense, experience and delight in this creation where everything is the same and nothing is the same, we must cry, "Wow, God!" When we genuinely sense, experience and delight in the truth that this "Wow God" has chosen to redeem rebellious creatures like us, we must cry again, "Wow, God!"

The "honey" of creation is sweet. I hope you see, believe and agree. But more than that, I hope and pray you will sense, experience and delight in this. May God use the creation to turn your heart to himself, for he has created us to be stewards and redeemed us to be worshippers.

May we say with our lips and our lives, "Wow, God!"