

“God’s Good Creation”

Sermon by Rev. Oby Ballinger

Edina Morningside Community Church; September 10, 2017

**Genesis 1:1-2:4a**

*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.*

When was the last time you cut open a ripe watermelon? Not the pale pre-cut cubes you get in plastic at the grocery store. I mean a whole huge melon, dark-green from the late summer sun and heavy with juice? Sliding a sharp stainless steel knife into a perfect round melon, you are Galileo, discovering otherworldly beauty. As the sides of a fresh watermelon fall open on the cutting board, the dark pink inside turns itself out for all the earth to marvel at. An aroma of sweet summer rises from the cut, hundreds of black seeds lie hidden in orderly rows, the ripe sugars are already almost in crystal form, and an ample rind provides green armor for the treasure within.

What a marvelous thing is a watermelon! Have you ever stopped to consider it? How many hours of sunlight did it take, falling for weeks on broad leaves, to grow twenty pounds of pure perfection? By what wisdom do roots grow in such a way that they catch rain from a dozen thunderstorms and pass it on, to be encapsulated in the time machine on your kitchen counter? How did the rain get up there in the first place, and where did the soil come from? How does it know to hold the roots and the water and the nutrients out of which watermelons are made? How in the world does anything so good come from plain old dirt?? Look deep into a watermelon or *any* little part of creation, and you can get lost in the mystery found there.

There are scientific answers for how the juice and the sweet get into watermelons. There are theories about rain, and soil, and the sun. There's a great story told by science about where it all came from, and how it might have been in the beginning of what we can imagine. I believe many of these theories are true, in a sense that they correctly describe how things work here and now. But science cannot answer why things are *this* way and not *that*. The limits of science are found when we stop asking "how", and start asking other questions. Who am I, to be so blessed by this incredible meal? Why do I feel this gratitude welling up in me as the juice runs down my chin? For whom is this other half of melon on the counter, and in what ways shall I share it? For such questions of identity, meaning, and purpose, we look to the Bible and the God to which it testifies.

In the very beginning, even before the Big Bang, there was always God. All that exists came into being because of God. This holiest of beings chose to create that which was not God, which was everything else—creation. "Let there be", God says, again and again. God creates distinctions: light and darkness, sky, earth and seas. Then within each space, something to fill it: sun, moon, stars, plants—and swimming, swarming, winging, creeping creatures. There are abundant rivers and fertile ground, a global jungle of every type of plant, birds of the air and fish in the sea, minerals in abundance—and watermelons too. Science can tell us how; the Bible here is content to say that God commanded and it was so.

The human story begins here with the rest of creation, but we reveal a special source. God says "Let us make humankind in our image"—and it has taken every person who ever existed to show what that means. Each person, no matter their shape, size, color, language, skills, age, or mental abilities, bears the image of this male, female, transgender, beyond gender God. If you want to know what God looks like, turn around, or look in the mirror! You are how God appears with skin on. And so is your neighbor, child, grandmother, enemy—all made in the image of God that's been there from the very beginning. Out of sheer artistic desire to "let there be", God creates the entire teeming cosmos, then with incredible generosity places us in the world, and calls it all good.

Oh, but God! What about the pristine watermelon patches in the productive heat of late summer torn to shreds in Texas by the gales of Hurricane Harvey? What about the creatures great and small who drowned in unimaginable torrents of rain there? What about Hurricane Irma, which even now in Miami is [spinning construction cranes like tops](#)? And a third hurricane—Jose—lining up to strike again

those poor Caribbean islands that Irma has already ravaged? What about the earthquakes that topple buildings and unleash tsunamis? What about great raging wildfires that consume verdant forests and all who live therein? This week there has been no ignoring the destructive chaos of God's creation. And that's just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Less visible from space but just as calamitous to individual lives are cancerous mutations, genetic disorders, memory loss, viral epidemics and insect-borne pestilence. If we sing hymns of praise for the goodness of creation but ignore all the ways that nature destroys life as well, we bury our heads in the water-logged sand.

It's been instructive for me to remember one thing this week about the Bible's first creation story. In all that which is brought into existence, God never promises that creation will be perfect. We hear again and again that it is *good*, but not perfect. It's as though God also recognizes the possibility that when something *not-God* is created, such a creation will meander, drift and decay. We are not in a pristine, fantasy, snow-globe world, but rather one which lives, breathes, moves and changes, thereby exposing us to destructive as well as creative chaos. Such dynamic movement is the common characteristic of ocean waters, weather patterns, celestial nebulae, and even the bedrock underfoot. This is what causes such death, even as it makes possible so much life. Therefore, though creation is never called perfect, God still calls it good.

Finally, what is *our* place in the cosmos—we who bear the image of this creative God? For centuries, humans have listened to this whole story and yet heard only one word: "dominion". Dominion is an uncommon word anymore, but it's been taken to mean that we have an unfettered right to have our own way with every part of creation. We have used rivers and oceans as sewers, harvested every tree from the landscape, removed mountaintops and dumped the toxic rubble in valleys nearby, built great sea walls in a vain attempt to keep out the water, churned hydrocarbons into the atmosphere at an unsustainable rate, and even sought to improve the watermelon through genetic enhancements. Yet in the very next chapter of Genesis, we read more what God intends for human beings. The word in Hebrew there is *shamar*, to "guard, keep, watch over, protect and care for." Our first vocation, our first reason for existing in the world, is that of *shamar*, taking care of the earth on God's behalf. Genesis tells us that we do not have free reign to do whatever we please. Our freedom reaches its limit when we cease to *shamar* and begin to exploit creation for our own purposes alone. Humanity must care for creation as God cares for us—with compassion, tenderness, and generosity.

On this day when we celebrate a new start for the church year, the Bible reminds us what truly matters from the very beginning. The God who creates all things and calls it good is creating still, and calls those made in the divine image to exercise healing, nurturing, life-giving care in the same manner. Creation is not perfect, and so we are called to serve and mend. That's why in the midst of all this, God calls the world, its creatures, and us alongside them, very good indeed. May it be so! Amen.