

Several years ago, I travelled to Israel. To help fund it, I applied for a grant from my seminary. In the application I wrote,

I believe that this opportunity will bring God's Word to life in new ways for me so that I may bring it to others. I can study about history, archeology, culture, etc., but I would like the opportunity to also be able to smell, feel, hear, taste, and spatially experience actually being there.

I spent two weeks hiking down the Mount of Beatitudes, travelling the Jericho Road, standing at the pools of Bethsaida and Siloam, praying at the base of the Temple's western wall, and walking the path from the Mount of Olives to Caiaphas' house Jesus might have taken the night before he died. The experience was everything I had hoped for.

As I was leaving the hotel on my way to the airport, one of the hotel employees carried my bag down a flight of stairs. He looked at me when we got to the bottom and said, "What do you have in here? Rocks?"

The answer was actually, "Yes." I had, in fact, about 15 pounds of rocks in my suitcase plus a few bottles of water from the Jordan River and Dead Sea.

I collect rocks from places I visit. They are a physical reminder of the places I've been and the people and my experiences there.

We do the same in the Church. The Sacraments are a physical sign of a spiritual truth. The coolness of water running down our head, the texture of the bread, and the taste of the juice bring to life the faith we cannot see.

John's Gospel tells us God is Spirit and Truth. But creation is the physical sign of God's character and presence in our lives. Creation enables us to smell, feel, hear, taste, and spatially experience the God we cannot see.

Today, we are going to the first page of our Bibles to Genesis 1 and the first story of creation.

When God began to create the heavens and the earth—the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God's wind swept over the waters—God said, "Let there be light." And so light appeared. God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness.

God named the light Day and the darkness Night.

There was evening and there was morning: the first day.

God said, "Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters to separate the waters from each other." God made the dome and separated the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome. And it happened in that way.

God named the dome Sky.

There was evening and there was morning: the second day.

God said, "Let the waters under the sky come together into one place so that the dry land can appear." And that's what happened. God named the dry land Earth, and he named the gathered waters Seas. God saw how good it was. – Genesis 1:1-10 (CEB)

Even if we can't see God, we come face to face with God as we encounter creation each day of our lives. We are witnesses to God's glory and splendor made incarnate in creation. As we just heard, out of a dark and formless sea, God spoke light, sky, land, and oceans into being. God organized that which was without shape or purpose into boundaried order.

Intellectually, we know this is true on the grand and cosmic scale, but we also experience the significance of God's boundaried order in our own lives. As children, many of us played pin the tail on the donkey. It's funny to watch others take their turn because we can see the totality of the room and where the donkey is. But when we're the one in the dark, it is as if we've been dropped in the middle of nowhere. Blindfolded and spun in a circle, we grope in the darkness trying to find something to orient ourselves.

God's separation of dark from light, earth from sky, water from land create a context in which life can take root and thrive. God continued to create this order in showing

- Abram and Sarai the Promised Land,
- creating a multitude of former slaves into a holy people,
- sending the prophets to help us understand what is right and wrong, and
- Christ dwelling as part of humanity to define what true love and life are.

The ordered boundaries God has created in our life are not there to fence us in. They guide us to make wise and faithful choices in how we live our life. They help us to understand the difference between who we are and who God is. Without them, we would be going through life blind and disoriented, desperate to find something to hold onto.

Instead, if we're honest with ourselves, God's sovereignty and an ordered creation are a comfort to us. It is the rock on which we build our identities and lives. And I believe, the only way we find peace.

God said, “Let the earth grow plant life: plants yielding seeds and fruit trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind throughout the earth.” And that’s what happened. The earth produced plant life: plants yielding seeds, each according to its kind, and trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind. God saw how good it was.

There was evening and there was morning: the third day. – Genesis 1:11-13 (CEB)

Having created a boundaried order, God continued to create, filling the earth with plants and trees. But if we listen closely, we begin to see that it was more than just foliage.

God’s plan of creation provided for rebirth.

The plant life God created was not only beautiful but held within it, its own future. Fruits and vegetables; nuts and grains would continue to grow and feed the earth. God provided a way to satisfy hunger so that life in all its forms could continue.

In the creating plants and trees in this way, God created a future. It is proof that God’s plan for creation was for it to continue, supporting itself in its self-renewal. Today, we’re often so far removed from the actual growing of the food we eat, it’s easy to never meditate on this miracle of abundance.

Here in Wisconsin where we experience all of the seasons, we have a front row seat to God’s gift of re-creation. Pictures of spring crocus, tulips, and daffodils spring up in my social media feed in March and April. In September and October, we appreciate the beauty of fall colors *because* we know the change does not lead to death but a time of sabbath – preparation for re-creation in the spring. God’s re-creating world bears witness to the hope and joy of God’s promise in creation that life will continue. It is a promise we see fulfilled every day.

God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night. They will mark events, sacred seasons, days, and years. They will be lights in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth.” And that’s what happened. God made the stars and two great lights: the larger light to rule over the day and the smaller light to rule over the night. God put them in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw how good it was.

There was evening and there was morning: the fourth day. – Genesis 1:14-19 (CEB)

Not content to simply separate the darkness from the light, God created the sun, moon, and the stars.

This sun that is 93 million miles away and captivates us with its beauty also has the power to light and heat our world. The power to coax plants out of the earth as well as the power to harden the ground such that nothing can grow.

The moon provides less light – although enough to cast shadows when full on a cloudless night. In its own way, this quiet sister is more powerful than the sun because the moon's gravity has the power to move oceans.

The stars do more than lead us in wonder and imagination. For millennia, they have been guiding humanity on our journey. In the same way seed-bearing plants created a future, the stars provide stability. Like the rising of the sun each day, the stars can be relied upon. They are a reminder that *God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.*¹

God's creation of day and night was also the creation of purpose. Night and day aren't merely the opposite of one another. They are woven together in their diversity to create the fullness of time and seasons. We know how important this is.

These last several months, we've been in a season where time has lost its value. What day it is, morning or evening, the week or the weekend, July or August seems to matter less and less.

Most of us find this challenging. The rhythmic nature of time helps us understand our life. Without the landmark of time, we find it hard to remember and put the past in order. Making plans for the future feels like trying to catch the wind.

We can get lost in apathy and meaninglessness. These last months, we've realized what a gift ordered time is in living a life of purpose..

God said, "Let the waters swarm with living things, and let birds fly above the earth up in the dome of the sky."²¹ God created the great sea animals and all the tiny living things that swarm in the waters, each according to its kind, and all the winged birds, each according to its kind. God saw how good it was.²² Then God blessed them: "Be fertile and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth."

There was evening and there was morning: the fifth day.

¹ Psalm 46:1 (NRSV)

God said, “Let the earth produce every kind of living thing: livestock, crawling things, and wildlife.” And that’s what happened. God made every kind of wildlife, every kind of livestock, and every kind of creature that crawls on the ground. God saw how good it was. – Genesis 1:20-25 (CEB)

I think creation must have been very peaceful after the fourth day, but God must not have considered it complete. God speaks into being the animals of the sea and the air, and finally, the animals that live on land. Like plants, animals were created with the ability to re-create.

By the way, this gives us the answer to which came first, the chicken or the egg? They were created together.

God created animal life with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. And I think a bit of humor. There are over 350,000 known species of beetles. The state of Arizona has 13 different species of rattle snake. There are eight species of bear. One of these, the American Black Bear has 16 different subspecies. All of these were created with a purpose and place in the world.

God created order, purpose, promise, and diversity in creation. Though all of this has been made displaying the many characteristics of God, God has still not placed their image within it. Therefore, God created once more.

Then God said, “Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.”

God created humanity
in God’s own image,
in the divine image God created them,
male and female God created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.” Then God said, “I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food. To all wildlife, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything crawling on the ground—to everything that breathes—I give all the green grasses for food.” And that’s what happened. God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good.

There was evening and there was morning: the sixth day. – Genesis 1:26-31 (CEB)

On this Lord's Day, we celebrate the love of God demonstrated in creation. When God first called us, it was in the midst of the perfection of creation. The world God created was beautiful, diverse, and self-renewing. God created

- boundaried order;
- time and purpose;
- the promise of rebirth and a future;
- diversity in plants, trees, birds, fish, livestock – and humanity.

All of this a manifestation of God's love.

Out of love and in God's own image, humanity was created. Like the rest of creation, there are differences in our physical bodies, languages, and cultures. But despite this beautiful diversity, God created us as one. It was to all humanity that God charged us to care for the world.

But despite the division and diversity in creation and humanity, God did not divide the world into parts. For just as humanity is one, so is creation. But to make sense of space and recognize diversity, humans created borders and all the good and bad that go with them. But even as we do this, God calls us to remember that

**The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it.²**

We are called to remember our common humanity as those created in the image of God, living in the world God created. In love, God created us and placed us within God's creation. Created in God's image, even though we are tasked with its care, we are still a part of creation.

Therefore, knowing that God created the world good, with purpose and a future, we should be led to humility rather than disregard. If we are the bearers of God's image in this world, shouldn't we tend to it in a way that is as good as God created it?

Shouldn't we love one another in the way God loves us?

Loving God means that we love what God does. And God's love is displayed in every celestial being, mountain and desert, lake and ocean, fish and walrus, blue jay and mosquito (yes, even the mosquitoes). We are to tend them in the fullness that God created them.

While God's love is demonstrated in all that God created, it is especially incarnate in every human being despite their nationality, ethnicity, age, gender, political

² Psalm 24:1 (NRSV)

affiliation, sexual preference, criminal record, bank account, occupation, or skin color. Each is made equally in the image of God. Each is beloved to God.

Creation is a miracle in which we continue to participate. It is a gift of life and beauty as well as a responsibility.

God enjoyed creation on the first Sabbath day, setting aside time so that we can enjoy it as well.

- We are invited to be drawn to worship, allowing God's good work to bring us into the presence of God.
- But at the same time, we are commissioned to tend and interact with earth, water, plant, and animal with the care that God used in creating them.
- And we have been called to love and value all humanity as God does.

May we bring the presence of God into our connection with nature and our relationship with one another. In this way, may creation be not only good but supremely good as God created it. Amen.