

*Good and Very Good – In the Beginning*

Genesis 1:1-27, 31; 2:1-4 CEB

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Pastor Sarah Wiles

*When God began to create the heavens and the earth— 2 the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God’s wind swept over the waters— 3 God said, “Let there be light.” And so light appeared. 4 God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God named the light Day and the darkness Night. There was evening and there was morning: the first day.*

*6 God said, “Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters to separate the waters from each other.” 7 God made the dome and separated the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome. And it happened in that way. 8 God named the dome Sky. There was evening and there was morning: the second day.*

*9 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. 10 God named the dry land Earth, and he named the gathered waters Seas. God saw how good it was. 11 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. 12 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. 13 There was evening and there was morning: the third day.*

*14 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. 15 They will be lights in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth.” And that’s what happened. 16 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. 17 God put them in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw how good it was. 19 There was evening and there was morning: the fourth day.*

*20 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.” 23 There was evening and there was morning: the fifth day.*

*24 God said, “Let the earth produce every kind of living thing: livestock, crawling things, and wildlife.” And that’s what happened. 25 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. 26 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 in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.” 27 God created humanity in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them... 31*

*God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good. There was evening and there was morning: the sixth day.*

*1 The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. 2 On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done. 3 God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creation. 4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.*

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This passage is so gorgeous, and it is so disheartening that it has become ground zero in debates about creationism, evolution, how to read scripture and its authority. Today it is even weaponized against our transgender and nonbinary siblings.

It seems like too beautiful a text to be such a battlefield.

But it is and we need to spend some time on what this passage is and is not. How do we read this passage as intelligent, grown-up people of faith?

Let's start with what this passage is not: it is not empirical. It does not claim to be science. This text as we have it today was most likely put together while the Israelites were exiled in Babylon, or soon afterward. They knew about Babylonian scientific methods. Babylonian astronomers were pioneers. They were the first to figure out planetary orbits and had the rudiments of an understanding that the world might actually orbit the sun and not the other way around. The Babylonians taught the Greeks. The crafters of this text knew about science.

And they were fully aware that what they were crafting here wasn't science. They knew about planets. This account leaves out the existence of planets entirely. It's not a scientific cosmology, and it's not an exhaustive taxonomy of everything ever encountered in the universe.

Instead of listing every single thing it uses a poetic pattern of speech called merism that lists two extremes as a way of including everything in between. Light and dark includes dawn and dusk and magic hour. Earth and Sea includes marshes and deltas and estuaries. Male and female is the same. It includes the mind-bending diversity of all humanity—in gender and in every other way.

It wasn't that our spiritual ancestors were trying to do science and were just really bad at it. They were doing something else. This is exactly what it sounds like: It's poetry. It's liturgy. It's worship.

They knew what we too often forget—there is far more at work in this cosmos and in our hearts than we could ever possibly capture empirically. That's why they included not one but two stories of creation.

Right after this is the story of the garden and the creation of Adam and Eve. Often, they're kind of run together in our minds and in our telling, but they're definitely not one story. The two stories use different words for God, tell of different attributes of God, and narrate the order of creation differently. In this first account creation starts from the top down—waters are pulled back from the earth. In the second water rises from the earth as a mist. In the first plants are made, and then animals, and then humans. In the second story, a human is made first. And then God makes a garden as a home and animals as companions. The differences between these two stories are irreconcilable.

The authors and compilers of the Bible knew that. They were not dumb. It's not that they just forgot to proofread. This is not a mistake that we need to cover up in our Bible. Our ancestors in the faith, the brilliant minds and souls who first told these stories, were not interested in a linear, empirical accounting of the facts of what happened at the beginning of it all. If they had been, they could have at least told one consistent story, or in editing, chosen just one. But that's not what they were doing.

God has given us minds. We are to use those minds to love God. Science is a great way in which to seek truth and love God. But it is not the only way to love God. Prayer, contemplation, story, and poetry are also ways to love God and to search for truth.

This passage is like that. It is poetry. It is song. It is a statement of faith. When we read it that way, it opens up, blossoms like a flower.

It claims many things, but the most insistent claim is the refrain of goodness. Good, good, good, very, very good.

When our ancestors sat down in exile 3,500 years ago to tell a story of who we are, this is what they believed was first and most important: we come from a beautiful, good beginning. All of us. God creates us and calls us good. This is the first thing. The most important thing.

God made you, just as much as the stars and the mountains and the oceans and the plains, and God says you are good. Do we really trust that?

We tend to jump so quickly into complicating the picture, hedging our bets. We talk about sin and brokenness. And yes, there's plenty of that, and it's real. The folks who crafted doxology had been invaded, conquered, and force-marched to a foreign land. They knew about evil. But when they sat down to craft the poetry of creation, this is the most important word: good.

Over the course of the summer, we'll read the stories of our spiritual ancestors: Sarah and Hagar and Abraham and Rebekah and Isaac and Rachel and Leah and Jacob and Esau. They were not particularly good people, not by any moral calculus. They lied and fought and betrayed each other and God. But again, and again God nudged them forward, looked out for them, met every failure with grace. Because they were good. Not because of anything they did or didn't do. Because God said so.

This is the first word of creation: you are a child of God. As is each and every person around you. As is all of creation. Good. Good. Beautiful and good.

Which means that at least part of what we're called to in life is to look for that goodness, to trust that it's there, to seek it out. One time Jesus told a group of people to look first the kingdom of God, and then worry about the rest. Look for creation's goodness first, and go from there.

It might surprise us where we find it.

I used to work for the Y. I did after-school care and day camps. My favorite job was working for Camp High Hopes. It was an outreach camp, which meant that it was for kids who couldn't afford camp. They all qualified for free lunch, so camp was where they were fed. The kids were as tough as their circumstances, and during staff training we always spent a full day talking about discipline. Our director was a wise, wise woman and she insisted that the most important thing was to catch them doing good. Catch 'em being good, she'd say, and you won't have a chance to catch 'em being bad.

Hakevian was a rising second grader who looked like he was maybe 4 years old because he was so malnourished. He had lived through more trauma than I will ever face. When he got in trouble, he would find the smallest corner possible and curl up in a tight ball, shaking, squeezing his eyes shut, clearly terrified of what might be done to him.

And Hakevian did cause quite a bit of chaos. He would fight. He would scream. He would run away. So we made it our mission to catch Hakevian doing good. Every day, all day long, we searched for things he'd done that were good. And we found it. And when we would catch him not fighting, not running away, not screaming, just being good, it was like he would come alive. You could see him blossom right in front of your eyes. His face would relax, the chaos would recede, and he would shine in all his glory. *Hakevian was good. Very good.*

And so are you. And so is your enemy. And so is the person who annoys you to no end. So is each and every person and part of creation.

When we start from that place, from a conviction that good is planted in each of us more deeply than anything that is wrong, it changes everything. It allows us to live in a way that is more loving, more forgiving, more joyful, more hopeful. And I can't think of anything we need more right now than love and mercy and joy and hope. So, thank God for this good, good world.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023