

Good, Not Perfect

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a five-part series

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Genesis -- selections from the first and second chapters (NRSV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² 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. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

²⁶ 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."

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ 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."

. . . ⁷ then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ¹⁹ So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Seemingly endless pictures of death and destruction. How can we reconcile homes and lives being ripped apart with our proclamation of a good and loving God?

An earthquake and tsunami that kills tens of thousands in Japan. A swarm of monster tornadoes that cut a wide swath through America's south and kills hundreds. No one did anything to bring these on. They just happened. The suffering and misery beyond measure.

The simple question is "Why?" How could this be? Where is God in all this? Why would a good and loving God create a world that can wreak such havoc on its inhabitants? Could it be that God isn't really as good and loving as we think? Or perhaps God would like to do something about it, but can't. Perhaps God isn't really as powerful as we think. How are we supposed to believe that a loving, good, and all-powerful God created this world, pronounced it "good" and then simply watches as natural disasters of one sort or another inflict misery on those made in God's image?

Over the years, such questions have come to my mind many times and I'm sure the same is true for you.

The truth is that I have a much easier time reconciling my belief in a loving and good God with the misery that we humans inflict on one another. Whether it is war or murder or theft or abuse, I understand that all this we sinful humans inflict on one another. We abuse the free will that God has given us. Even starvation is a human created problem, at least in

our day. There is plenty of food capacity on the planet to feed everyone and we have the means to get it to them, but it is our collective sinfulness that stands in the way of filling the empty bellies.

I even understand (at least I think I do!) why God gave us this free will that we so horribly abuse. He wants us to love . . . and for love to be love it *must* be freely given or it isn't really love.

However, free will and its exercise have nothing to do with these disasters. Sure, I know we build in some places we shouldn't, but earthquakes and tornados devastate vast regions. We might have the means to lessen the suffering, but we could never eliminate it.

Recently, Terence Fretheim, a professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, published a book entitled, *Creation Untamed*. I've always found Fretheim to be worthwhile reading and I had the pleasure of hearing him speak last fall. This book didn't disappoint. He takes a hard-nosed, scripture-based look at the theological questions swirling around natural disasters. His book is the basic resource underlying this five-week series. If you feel spurred on to read the book for yourself, I hope you will do so.

Dominion and Stewardship

In Genesis 1:26, God gives the humans "dominion" (in the NRSV) over all the creatures of the planet. The Hebrew word here, *radah*, is most often translated "rule," as in to rule over. It is the authority held by kings. So the question then is this: What sort of rulers are we to be over this planet? And the answer to that question is straightforward. We are to exercise this dominion as Jesus, the King of Kings, rules. Jesus is to be our model of what it means to "rule" over the creatures of the earth.

That is why Eugene Peterson gets it just right in his paraphrase of 1:26, when he uses the words "responsibility for" to render the Hebrew *radah*. As our king, Jesus has taken responsibility for us, as a shepherd for his sheep. Jesus showers us with care and with love. These are the images that ought to guide us as we exercise our responsibility for God's creation.

Stewardship is a word often used to convey this God-given responsibility for all that God has given us. In the NT, the image of humans being overseers or stewards of God's house is used ten times. But Leonard Sweet suggests that "steward" is probably not the best way to think about this. After all, he notes, who really uses "steward" anymore, other than to refer to someone you might meet on a cruise ship!

Instead, Sweet suggests that "trustee" is more meaningful for us and would be a better translation of the Greek. Many of us have some experience with trusts and the responsibilities held by trustees, even if it is simply some sort of family estate. When we think of ourselves as God's trustees, the message of the Bible becomes a little clearer. We are given dominion over God's creation, not so we can rule as a tough or selfish taskmaster, but so we can be effective trustees of God's wealth, managing it wisely, helping it to grow and flourish. God's creation is not ours, we don't own it; rather, we hold it in trust.

A careful look at the creation story

Fretheim begins by asking us to take a closer look at the creation story. He contends that the world was created good, but not perfect; that the world was created with the expectation of change and growth. In other words, the cosmos created by God was built to be dynamic not static, from the beginning. The dynamism had nothing to do with sin and rebellion; it is just the nature of the fabric from which our world was made.

Here's some of the evidence from the creation accounts.¹

- God pronounces creation "good" and "very good" at the end of each creating day. But what does it mean? It can't really mean perfection or finality, for after God creates the man, we learn that God recognizes that "it is not good that the man should be alone" and God resolves to make the man a helper (2:18). When the animals prove

¹ My view of the two creation stories (1:1-2:4a & 2:4b-25) is that they are two perspectives of a single account. The first story is written from the perspective of God. The second story is written from the perspective of the humans. Thus, they are complementary, not contradictory, as some suggest.

unsatisfactory helpers, God fashions a woman, using the man as raw materials. All this speaks to growth and change, even to elements of the “not good” being present in the “good” creation.

- When God gives the humans a beautiful garden in which to live, they are also told it is theirs “to till and keep” (2:15). Thus, the garden itself is a place of growth and change that must be tended and worked. It is good but it is not “perfect” or even “complete.” In the context of a garden that must be worked, I’m not even sure what “perfect” means, but it can’t mean static or unchanging.
- The most direct evidence of a “good not perfect” creation is from 1:28. God gives the humans this charge: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.” Subdue it? A creation which still must be subdued is far from perfect or complete. Fretheim suggests that the best sense of the Hebrew here is “to bring order out of continuing disorder.” There is more on this word in the text box below. The result of this “subduing” must be that the creation came to look far different than it did on the seventh day, just as it continues to look different each day from the day before.

Subdue

Here is some basic info on the Hebrew word that is translated “subdue” in 1:28:

This verb and its derivative occur fifteen times in the Old Testament. It is evidently related to Akkadian *kabāsu* “to tread down,” and Arabic *kabasa* “to knead, stamp, press” (cf. also Arabic *kabasa* “to seize with the hand”). In the Old Testament it means “to make to serve, by force if necessary.”

Despite recent interpretations of Genesis 1:28 which have tried to make “subdue” mean a responsibility for building up, it is obvious from an overall study of the word’s usage that this is not so.

kābaš assumes that the party being subdued is hostile to the subduer, necessitating some sort of coercion if the subduing is to take place. Thus the word connotes “rape” in Esther 7:8, or the conquest of the Canaanites in Numbers 32:22, 29; Joshua 18:1; 1 Chronicles 22:18. In 2 Chronicles 28:10; Nehemiah 5:5; Jeremiah 34:11, 16 it refers to forced servitude.

Therefore “subdue” in Gen 1:28 implies that creation will not do man’s bidding gladly or easily and that man must now bring creation into submission by main strength. It [creation] is not to rule man. However, there is a twistedness in humanity which causes us to perform such a task with fierce and destructive delight. Try as we might, we cannot subdue this. But it can be subdued and this is the promise of Micah 7:10, “He will subdue our iniquities.”¹

¹Harris, R. L., Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., & Waltke, B. K. (1999). *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (430). Chicago: Moody Press.

What is the result of all this? A remarkable statement of God’s choosing to make humanity partners in the on-going processes of creation. From the beginnings of creation the humans are given responsibility for God’s creation and participate in its on-going dynamism and growth. Fretheim puts it this way: “From the beginning, God chooses not to be the only one who has creative power and the capacity, indeed the obligation, to exercise it. . . . God is a power-sharing God, indeed a creation-sharing God, and God will be faithful to that way of relating to those created in the divine image.”²

In grappling with the difficult theological issues created by natural disasters, we have to begin by recognizing that the cosmos was created as changing and dynamic, even wild and hostile, needing to be subdued. This is a far cry from the placid and idyllic Garden of Eden that is portrayed by most artists. Further this dynamism and wildness is pronounced “good” and “very good” by God. This is how God designed the cosmos and, thus, God is pleased with his creation. How could it be otherwise? Nonetheless, this challenges some of our long-held notions of God’s creative activity as well as our own participation in it. In the coming weeks, we’ll work our way to a more clear-eyed understanding of just what the Bible tells us about God and his untamed creation.

²from p. 31-32 of *Creation Untamed*. There is much more on this topic in the first chapter of Fretheim’s book than I can cover in the space of this study.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I'm pretty sure that all Christians have wrestled with the theological questions swirling around God and natural disasters. Some might believe that all things happened only if God wants them to. Others might believe that all things happened only if God allows them to. What have been your own thoughts about these questions? What would you say to someone who asked you how a good and loving God could cause or even allow such destruction, death, and misery?

2. Does the notion of a "good not perfect" creation strike you as a bit odd? How about a universe in which change and growth are built into its structure? Even further, how about this business of humanity needing to subdue a wild and hostile world? How different is all this from the ways you've thought of the creation stories and the Garden of Eden? How might this affect how you understand God's work in the natural world? How does the so-called "evolution debate" come into play here?

3. Finally, what can we learn from God's handing over so much responsibility and power to humanity? What does it say about us? About the God we worship?

Daily Bible Readings

The readings will take you through both creation accounts. Read them with a careful eye.

Monday, Genesis 1:1-25 God creates the cosmos, the earth, and the animals	Tuesday, Genesis 1:26-31 God creates humankind, makes them partner in the stewardship and subduing of the earth.
Wednesday, Genesis 2:1-3 God rests on the seventh day. How do you practice Sabbath? Do you rest?	Thursday, Genesis 2:4-17 God creates the man and gives him a beautiful in which to live and to work.
Friday, Genesis 2:18-25 All is not good in God's good creation. God must fashion a helper for the man. The two of them become one flesh.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

New Sunday Morning Series Begin This Week: May 15

9:30 Sermon Series in the Sanctuary

Creation Untamed: God, the Bible, and Natural Disasters

There is perhaps no greater challenge to our proclamation of a loving God than the havoc and suffering inflicted by natural disasters. In this sermon series, we will face the hard questions by taking a very careful look at what the Bible says . . . and what it doesn't say.

Scott's 11:00 Class in Festival Hall

Differing Views on the Lord's Supper

Though all Christians share the Lord's Supper, the practices and beliefs surrounding this meal vary widely from denomination to denomination and even church to church. In this series, we'll examine the varying beliefs of seven denominations: Roman Catholic, Episcopal/Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal.



Scott's Tuesday Lunchtime Class

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 every Tuesday. This week we continue our discussion of **Revelation**. We'll be in it for a while as we discover that this strange book is actually meaningful to us today.

Join us whenever you can. Bring a study Bible.