

Very Good

Genesis 1:1-2:4

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June 11, 2017

Years ago I was working with the young people of our church and we took the middle school students, actually we called them junior high students back in the day, to an amusement park. I can't remember how this all happened, but at one point I was standing in one of the long lines you often find at these amusement parks, maybe for a ride, maybe for an ice cream cone, maybe for some souvenir, but at one point I was standing and talking with a girl who was in seventh grade. She brought up that she had a bit of a crush on a boy from school. They had spent some time together, and in a quiet and secretive whisper she revealed that as they were walking along, he reached out and held her hand. She looked at me to see what my reaction was. I smiled and asked, "What did you think of that?" She said, "It was nice."

I'm not sure why I remember that. This was more than 30 years ago, and it was really a small moment in time. But it stuck with me. A young girl holding hands with a boy, maybe for the first time, said, "It was nice." I thought of my young friend this past week as I was reading an article. The article quoted Raymond Chandler, a novelist, who once wrote of how passionate love becomes routine: "The first kiss is magic. The second kiss is intimate. The third kiss is routine." If the novelist named Raymond Chandler is accurate, I'm afraid our lives won't have much joy, much passion, much excitement, and much surprise. By the third kiss it is routine. I wonder if my little friend still finds herself when she holds a hand saying, "It was nice."

The same article that said the third kiss becomes routine was titled, "Caught by surprise." Although one man spoke of beautiful things becoming routine, Abraham Heschel offered an alternative view. Heschel was a well-known and well-respected rabbi. When asked what he believes his greatest gift was, he replied, "My ability to be surprised."¹ This morning I believe that the wonder and magic of life does not have to become routine. This morning I believe that by the grace of God we can be like Rabbi Abraham Heschel, that we can maintain our ability to be surprised. One of the reasons for my belief is because of you.

Just a week ago, on Friday, June 2nd, many of you allowed yourselves to be surprised by something you have seen many times. Following the rain that has been present much of the month of June, on that particular Friday something appeared in the sky. The sun had come out. The clouds had parted. The rain had

¹ Peter W. Marty, "Caught by Surprise," *The Christian Century*, June 7, 2017, p.3. Marty quotes both Heschel and Chandler in his article.

stopped. And in the sky was a rainbow. Actually, it was a double rainbow. This was not the first rainbow that has ever appeared in the skies over Rhode Island. It was not even the first double rainbow. But instead of saying, “Been there, done that,” or, “Oh, it’s just another rainbow,” many of you did the right thing. You stopped. You stared. You oohed and you aahed. You texted your friend, like someone did to me, and said, “Did you see that?” And if I know you, you said a prayer of thanksgiving to God, for such a beautiful and marvelous gift, a sign of God’s goodness and God’s grace, filling our skies.

Rainbows don’t have to become routine. To be a child of God is to maintain the ability to be surprised by what God does, surprised in a way that sparks wonder and awe and reverence and joy. Today we have before us a passage of Scripture that ought to give us the chills. It is the story of creation. It is the story of God speaking into the earth that at that time was formless and empty, cloaked in darkness. When God spoke light came out of the darkness. Bam! God called the light day and the darkness night. And there was evening and there was morning—the first day. What follows is the account of how it came to be. Can you hear it again like it is the first time? Better yet, can you hear for what might be the hundredth time, and allow it to be just as marvelous and amazing as it was the first time? Perhaps best of all can you hear it after countless times and experience a sense of awe that grows deeper and more reverent with each telling of God’s majestic actions?

Just because we hear something many times, just because we see something many times, just because we experience something many times, it does not have to become routine. Music is a helpful example of something that we hear and experience many times. Yet instead of growing old or boring or routine, it grows deeper and the impact is even more profound as we hear it over and over again. There is a hymn that is a favorite of many people. It is a hymn that speaks of the wonders of creation. It is a hymn I have heard and sung many, many times. It begins with these words, “O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made. I see the stars I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed.” The hymn is *How Great Thou Art*.

We were on a church camping trip at a beautiful retreat center on the Guadalupe River in the hill country of Texas. The river wound its way through the camp, and there was an old-fashioned waterslide and one of those big inflatable devices they call The Blob that you jump on and launch another person high into the air and they come crashing down in the water. The river is in the hill country. Much of the camp is set high above the river, in the hills. There is a hillside chapel, looking out on the valley where the river flows. One night we gathered for an outdoor worship service. When we sat down the skies were clear, but in Texas the weather can change literally in a minute. We had the call to worship and some prayers and then

we started to sing a song. Within just those few minutes storm clouds had filled the sky. We started singing the hymn, *How Great Thou Art*, and with a timing that might have drawn a big smile from God as he looked down on a small flock of Presbyterians having an outdoor worship service, when we sang, “I hear the rolling thunder...” lightning lit up the sky, followed by a crack of thunder that sent us all running. We were scared to death. We were also filled with this incredible sense of awe. “Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, *How Great Thou Art...*” Nothing boring, nothing routine about that. We felt the presence of God and it set our hearts to racing.

A couple of years ago I was visiting my family in California. My brothers and sisters and their children still live there. That particular summer we had some business to take care of. My mom had passed away the year before and we were going to have a small service for her. My mom and dad both worked for the YMCA during the summers when we were growing up, and they would take us for the whole summer to a beautiful camp in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. When my dad died we gathered at the camp and had a service to remember him. So now we decided to do the same thing for my mom. One of the things my dad did at the camp was to restore trails, and late in his life they named one of the trails at camp in his honor. I can’t even begin to tell you what it means to me to come to the beginning of what we all call the Bible Rock Trail, and see my dad’s name on that sign.

I was there a few hours before the small service we were going to have for my mom, so I made my way up the trail. “When through the woods and forest glades I wander and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees, when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze...” Hiking through the woods, hearing the birds singing sweetly in the trees, reaching the summit where I could look down from the lofty mountain grandeur and see our childhood lake, do you think it seemed routine, ordinary, old hat to stop and sing *How Great Thou Art*? Of course not. In fact it has heightened my awareness of God’s presence whenever I sing that song.

Does the creation story grow old with its telling and retelling? God help us if we are not moved by the beauty of the sunset or the hope that greets us each morning with the first rays of light. God help us if our hearts are not stirred by the crashing of waves, the singing of birds, the juices that drip from a fresh peach, the warm breath of a puppy, the mist from a waterfall, or the tail of a shooting star as it flashes through the dark night sky.

My young friend reflected on the simple act of holding hands with a boy and she said, "It was nice." Imagine this morning God Almighty, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, calling you to listen once again to the story of creation. Imagine this morning God Almighty, the Maker of Heaven and Earth beckoning you to enter in to the story of creation. Imagine this morning God Almighty, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, inviting you to find your true self in the story of creation. Imagine God extending his hand to you, taking you by the hand, sitting you down by his side, and unfolding the marvel and the majesty of creation, day by wonderful day. Do you think it would ever get old having God hold your hand and telling you where you came from?

Day by day, creation comes to life. Light from darkness...water separated from water and the expanse above is called the sky...land and seas take shape...then the land comes to life with vegetation and seed-bearing plants and trees and fruit of all kinds. This is followed by the bodies in the heavens, the sun and moon, the stars and planets. While we are still drinking in the enormity of the Milky Way the waters begin to teem with creatures and the birds give the first flap of their wings. And then the land produces living creatures, livestock and wild animals and squirrels and chipmunks and woodchucks who would chuck wood if a wood chuck could chuck wood, and...and...there are these brief but important words that God interjects through all the days and hours and minutes and seconds, the pronouncement a God who is pleased with his creation feels compelled to say over and over again. "It is good." He says it more than once. He says it twice. And then a third time. Some poor fellow said by the third kiss it becomes routine. But with God his words "It is good" never become routine. He says it day after day after day.

It is good, it is good, it is good...until the moment comes when this Almighty God, Maker of Heaven and Earth, comes to the part of the story where says, "Then I made you." Holding our hand in the palm of his hand...holding our hand in the palm of the hand that reached into the dust of the earth and created us and blew life into us...holding our hand he says, "Then I made you." Routine? Ordinary? Boring? Oh no, we could very well get lost in the story of creation. "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man, what am I as a human being, a small, frail, weak, limited, tiny human being?" We are but a speck of dust, less than a moment of time in the scope and sweep of eternity, what am I that you would even take notice? But this is God's story, and so God says, "Then I made you."

“Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26, 27)

God help us if we ever forget that our lives are precious in your sight, O Lord. And God help us, in fact, God forgive us, for the many times we do forget that the life of others is precious in your sight. It is just a few pages later that brother rises against brother, putting him to death, and defending his action by saying, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Oh yes, this creation story that never becomes routine awakens us again and again to the sanctity of human life. Human beings are created in the image of God. We are called to preserve and protect that image of God, the brothers and sisters with whom we share this planet called earth. And that very same passage tells us we are given the charge of being stewards of all creation. To rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the livestock and over the whole earth and all the creatures of the earth means that we do not have the privilege or the right to deplete our planet, and we certainly do not have the right to destroy our planet. A sign of our faithfulness as stewards is when all of life flourishes, creation and all of God’s creatures. When we see actions that destroy creation or destroy God’s creatures, we work to change those actions. A passage like this never becomes routine. It is a constant call to embrace all of life, to cherish all of life, to preserve all of life, for in doing so we bring glory and honor to the very one who created all things in heaven and on earth.

Today is Trinity Sunday, and it is an appropriate day to revisit the creation story. There are definitely hints of God in three persons being actively involved in the creative process. In the beginning was God. The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And the world was created by the Word of God. God spoke and the heavens and the earth came into being. So it is that the God who holds our hand and says let me tell you where you came from, is the God whose hand will hold us and guide us as we journey through the pages of Scripture. And one day that Word of God will become flesh and dwell among us. He will literally hold us by the hand, as only a God who becomes incarnate, a God who takes on human flesh could do. Because the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, we know of a God whose hands not only held us, but whose very hands received the nails that pierced his palms as he was lifted up on the cross. Now that song about *How Great Thou Art* moves from the story of creation, of rolling thunder and birds who sing sweetly in the trees, and our sense of wonder and awe and reverence goes to a deeper and more profound place. “And when I think that God his Son not sparing sent him to die I scarce can take it in. That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing

he bled and died to take away my sin..." The creation story does not become old or routine, because it is the beginning of the story of God's salvation, the beginning of the story of the God who not only created us in his very own image, but was not willing to abandon us when our lives drifted away and that image was defiled.

And this creation story does not become old or routine because it is the beginning of the story that we are absolutely assured has a happy ending, a glorious ending, a perfect ending. One day we who are created in the image of God, redeemed by the God who became flesh and offered himself for us, one day we will all be gathered together, all creation will be gathered together to live with God in eternity and in everlasting love. There is a fourth verse to the hymn that begins with the wonder of creation. I think of that fourth verse when I remember the time we sang it not at a hillside chapel overlooking a peaceful flowing river, and not on a beloved trail set among towering mountain trees and accompanied by sweetly singing birds, but in a bar of all places. Who sings hymns in a bar?

We were in Thessaloniki, a place Paul visited on his missionary journeys. Our trip was called The Footsteps of Paul, and it took us to Greece and Turkey. We had been at the biblical town of Berea earlier that day and were headed to Philippi the next, when we walked by the bar in the hotel where we were staying in Thessaloniki. We recognized another group at the bar, for they had also been at Berea earlier that day. They had taken over the piano in the hotel bar and they were singing. We stopped to listen as they sang show tunes from Broadway. Then they turned to the Beatles and these folks were having fun. Somehow one of the members of our group got dragged in to sing with them, and she found out they were members of a Filipino church from Southern California who were on a Christian tour of the biblical sites where Paul had travelled. Now I can't think of a more abrupt transition than to go from singing Broadway show tunes and Beatles songs about Yesterday and Yellow Submarines to singing church hymns. But there in that hotel bar in Macedonia where 2,000 years before a stranger came to town telling the story of a man named Jesus who was the Savior of the world, in that hotel bar the person playing the piano started to play a hymn that has been played so many times it should have become routine, ordinary, taken for granted and perhaps ignored. But that hotel bar became a glimpse of heaven when Filipinos from California and Presbyterians from Texas and anyone else who happened to be present began to sing. And we came to the last verse, the verse where creation achieves its final goal, when all God's children of every race and nation and tribe and tongue will be brought together to dwell with our God and to know him face to face. "When Christ shall come with shouts of acclamation and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart. Then I shall bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, 'My God how great thou art.' Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art."

My little friend years ago told me about walking with a boy she was interested in. He reached out and held her hand. I asked her how it was. She said, "It was nice." Won't you let God take you by the hand today and tell you his story of creation? Won't you let God take you by the hand and tell you where you came from? Won't you let him tell you about his plan and purpose for your life? Won't you let him take your hand and tell you how much he loves you? Won't you let him take you by the hand and lead you, and lead me, and lead us together as his church, as his people, as his family, as his very own Body, as together we live into the fullness of faith that comes through holding hands with Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior? What is it like when God holds our hand? It is nice. It is good. Indeed, it is very good. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.