

“Overflowing with goodness”

Genesis 1

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I check my email frequently. I pay attention to my text messages. No letter arrives at our house that I don't read. Now the phone, that one is tricky. We get a constant barrage of calls from numbers that seem plausible, the right area code, etc...but they are all scam or spam. So maybe the phone is where I missed it. You see, I keep waiting for an invitation from a television station to make a guest appearance. Day after day after day after day after hour after minute and for what seems like perpetuity and even infinity, the television presents a seemingly endless recounting of bad news. I came across something from what must be a journalism class, and it says, “Basically, if there's violence, conflict or death involved, it gets top billing. Nowhere is this more true than in television news, which coined the expression, ‘If it bleeds, it leads.’” In other words, bad news is good news for television. Bad news draws in the ratings.

Nevertheless, I persist in waiting for an invitation. The invitation would be something like this, “Pastor Wayne, we are going to break into our normal and nightly news cycle of bad news, and we would like you to bring us some good news. Could you please make time to bring us some good news?” Can you imagine one of the anchors, right in the middle of one of those bleeds that leads stories cutting away to say, “We interrupt our broadcast tonight, to bring you some good news.” And with all the millions of people watching I would open my bible to the exact same spot I opened my bible this morning and bring good news.

- In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and it was good
- God said let there be an expanse to separate the waters below from the waters above...and it was good
- God said let there be dry ground...and it was good
- God said let the land produce vegetation and seed-bearing plants and trees that bear fruit...and it was good...good and juicy.

- God said let there be a great light to govern the day and a lesser light to govern the night and let's throw in an array of shining stars...and it was good.
- God said let the water teem with living creatures and let the sky be filled with flying birds whose colors and songs will bring such joy...and it was good.
- God said let the land produce living creatures...and with those living creatures of the land God also said, "Let us make humans in our own image...so God created human beings in God's very own image...and God blessed them...male and female...created in God's own image...and God saw all that he made...and God said, "It is very good."
- Then God rested and that was good.

I keep checking my email frequently. I pay attention to my text messages. I read every letter that arrives at our house. I'm even willing to answer a call that says "spam risk" in the hopes that one day I can share good news in a world that seems so filled with the bad.

Reading this passage from Genesis, a foundational passage for our faith, I guess I've come to recognize that this passage doesn't bleed with bad news, and so because it doesn't bleed it doesn't have much chance to lead. I understand ratings and demographics and viewer preferences. But even if the network executives don't make it happen, couldn't God intervene and let the world hear this good news? In seven days, God created this wonderful world in which we live. You mean to tell me God couldn't hijack some satellite, interrupt some news feed and clear at least a few minutes for the world to hear this good news? Whether God can or cannot do that divine intervention, and there really is no doubt God can do something like that, God has not chosen to do that yet.

But that in no way means God does not want the world, the whole entire world, to know the good news that this world and all within it is created by a God who is good and who has made this world good. Look where this passage about the goodness of creation is placed. This is the first thing we turn to when we open the bible. Primacy of place says this creation story is vital to our understanding of God and the world in

which we live. Indeed, this story is vital to understanding our own lives in relation to God and to the world. Before any other story or situation is explored, God reveals God's very own goodness and the goodness of all that is created by God. And so, if this story is so important, what is God's plan for getting the word out? He sure isn't interrupting the nightly news. Unless I have missed it, God has not hijacked a satellite. I know, I've been checking my messages and I've been watching the broadcast. There is lots of "If it bleeds it leads", but very little about the God who is good. So how does God plan to get this important story out?

Apparently, some people like you and me share this story with others. We don't get top billing on the nightly news, but there are opportunities. Someone was once so mesmerized with God's good creation they wrote these words, "All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all." Not content with having only a chorus, they added verses. Each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings, God made their glowing colors; God made their tiny wings." Someone else came along and set those words to music. Now in our hymnal, number 20, is a beautiful hymn of praise about all that is good in God's creation. The person who wrote those words doesn't want to be the only one celebrating God's goodness. The fourth verse of that hymn invites us all to join the chorus of praise. "God gave us eyes to see them, and lips that we might tell, how great is God Almighty, who has made all things well."

Bridgette found the artwork that is on the cover of our bulletin. Bright colors, flowers, butterflies, two beautiful children made in the image of God. How many artists have put pen to ink and brush to paint and created something that evokes the goodness of God and God's good creation? How many photos have been posted on social media with sunrises and sunsets, crashing waves, blossoming trees, quiet streams and rushing rivers? Liturgical dance sways and swings with movements that mesmerize, and those movements offer praise to God. Woodworkers capture goodness in such marvelous ways. Quilters and sewers and knitters each add to the growing chorus. Gardeners and farmers, florists with their flowers, choirs with their voices and musicians with their

instruments...if we all tell the story of God's good creation, the nightly news and stories that have to bleed to lead will not be the only thing people come to understand.

At a time of particularly bad news for the nation of Israel, the prophet Isaiah gave a summons for the people to look beyond their discouragement and dismay. There was no nightly news broadcast back in the 6th or 7th century BCE, but there was plenty of bad news. And the prophet called for the people of God to tell their story, even when times are hard. When the people of God tell their story, it is such a blessing. "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings." The nightly news might not carry God's good creation as a breaking story, but you can. You can. "God gave us eyes to see them, and lips that we might tell, how great is God Almighty, who has made all things well." God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and what God made is good.

Something very interesting about the first verses in the bible, those verses about how God was at work in the beginning, making the heavens and the earth, is that those verses are the suggested verses to use on what the church calls Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is the revelation that God, who is one, exists within God's unity as the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A mighty mystery surrounds the Trinity, but perhaps you can understand why the opening verses of Genesis are assigned to the church to read on Trinity Sunday. Within the first three verses of the bible, we find three things about God.

1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (God the Father)
2. The Spirit of God was hovering over the water. (God the Spirit)
3. And God said...God spoke...God's Word created. The Gospel of John has a thing or two to say about that Word of God. John's gospel tells us the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That word that became flesh is Jesus Christ, God's Beloved Son. (God the Son)

Exploring God in the fullness of the Trinity gives us another way to express the goodness of God. The most familiar expression of the Trinity is God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Another way we to

express God as the Trinity is to say Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. In terms of God's goodness, I want to focus on the word Redeemer for a moment. Genesis one is a long dissertation of God's goodness as displayed so vividly in creation. Later in the same book of Genesis we discover God's goodness is also made known in God's actions as the Redeemer. You see, although we finish Genesis chapter one literally dripping with God's goodness, we do not have to read much further to come upon things that are bad. It turns out the bible also has its own version of if it bleeds it leads. The bad news of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God takes the lead. Their son Cain murders his brother Abel. Soon a person arises who wants to seek vengeance seventy-seven times. Genesis, on the heels of such a good beginning, has plenty of bad news.

The poster child for bad news in Genesis is the son of Jacob whose story starts off with such promise. Joseph is the favored son of Jacob. He receives a coat of many colors to signify his special place in his father's heart. Joseph is the recipient of visions and dreams. When Joseph receives those visions and dreams, he is quick to share that those visions and dreams involve him ascending to a place high above the rest of the family, including his father Jacob. And then the bad news starts. It is a story of sibling rivalry that grows into bitter hatred and a betrayal of Joseph by his own brothers. He is sold into slavery, abandoned, and cut off from his family. He ends up being falsely accused of sexual misconduct and he is thrown in prison. He languishes in prison even though he comes to the aid of his fellow prisoners who when set free promptly forget all about Joseph. Even when things turn to the better, he still carries with him memories that are bitter. He is dead to his family. He is completely cut off. Yes, he makes a new beginning, but think how much Joseph lost and left behind and how much pain and sorrow he carried with him. The story of Joseph is unveiled slowly and over many chapters and it covers more than twenty years. For twenty years the lead story was one of brokenness, betrayal, and bitter disappointment. But God was at work. The God who created the heavens and the earth in seven days spent more than 20 years bringing redemption to Joseph and his family. When we encounter a world filled with bad news, we not

only proclaim the goodness of God as the Creator, we also tell of the God who redeems the deepest divisions and the most heartbreaking losses. Genesis begins with the goodness of creation. Genesis ends with Joseph, the one who endured so much, testifying that God redeems life's bitter, devastating and disappointing experiences. As Genesis comes to an end Joseph tells his brothers that though what they did was intended to bring harm, God was at work to bring good. God the Redeemer was at work to bring good.

God is at work as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. God's good work overflows in our lives through the blessing of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul uses the 8th chapter of Romans to tell us the good news of the Holy Spirit. The bad news that begins with the turning away from God in the Garden of Eden, the bad news that begins so soon after all the good news of Genesis one, finds its ultimate expression in human beings being separated from God by sin and brokenness. Friends, to be separated from God is bad news. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the revelation of how God overcomes our sin and rebellion. The Apostle Paul lets us know God's sure and certain sign that we have been redeemed, that our sins have been overcome, our brokenness made better, is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God gives us the Holy Spirit so that we know we belong to God. It is the Holy Spirit who brings us so close to God we realize we have been adopted by God's grace into God's family. That feeling of being close to God is so real and tangible and strong we cry out to God, "Abba, Father." Convinced that we belong to the God who has redeemed us and will never let us go, we come to believe that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that has been given to us in Jesus Christ. With that rock-solid faith, that God loves the world so much he sent his only Son to die for our sins, the Apostle makes an incredible statement of faith. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him..." (Romans 8:28)

And a world where what bleeds is what leads, the work, and the witness of God as our Father, as the Son, as the Holy Spirit, is a work and a witness that in all things God is working for God, for our God, for the goodness of all humanity, for the goodness of all creation.

One of great privileges of being a pastor is being called on by people during their times of loss to help with a funeral. Death has come, the ultimate separation. Searching for comfort and hope and healing during this time of loss, I am invited in as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ and with the family, we plan a funeral or a memorial service. Because God is who God is, able to work during the most difficult moments of our life to bring comfort, to bring peace, to bring hope, so often I leave a funeral or memorial service and say, "It was good." What I am really saying is, "God is good."

I received a call to help a family with a service this week, a family from the community. I met with the daughter of the woman who died. She shared her remembrances of her mother. The rest of the family could not come to our planning meeting, so I told her if other family members wanted to share a memory, email it to me. The last few years the woman who died faced some difficult and painful health issues. When she was young her father died, she had even experienced the deep sadness of losing a son when the boy was just eight. There was plenty of sadness and struggle in her life...as there is in each one of our lives. When I invite people to send me memories, often only one or two respond. This time the responses flooded in. And it was good.

Her brother who had grown up with her, who was her little brother, wrote about his "older sister" with humor. She would tell him, "Mom and Dad and I are not your real family. We are German spies." I was about 3-4 and she was about 7 (and I didn't buy it for a minute). Although as big sister she won most of their fights, he remembered the time she told him there was no Santa. He went running in tears to their mother and shared what his big sister had told him. He said she got in trouble for that, and he continued to get gifts from "Santa" for several more years. For him, that was good. And then with pride he told about all the accomplishments of his big sister...and it was good.

Her children wrote of her steadfast love, of her strong will that persevered through the difficult challenges of her life, of the beauty of music as she loved to sing and won awards for her skills with the oboe. A man who grew up as a child in the neighborhood where the woman lived wrote how she was a second mom to him. This man's own mother

was always sick, and this woman was always there when the man's mother was in a time of need. He wrote how her home was an oasis for him as he had a very tough childhood. Finally, he said she was not only the matriarch of her own family but of the whole neighborhood. When we love our neighbor...that is good. Her sister-in-law remembered meeting her for the first time in August of 1963 at a birthday party. "She welcomed me to her party, and said, 'And hopefully to the family.'" Through more than 50 years, all the births, vacations, occasions of joy and the sad passing of loved ones, "I felt welcomed, loved, and cared for by her. She left a wonderful legacy." That is good.

Her grandson's memories were literally sweet. "Grammie taught me one of the most important lessons very early in life; food can always bring people together. Whether it was through her pizza, iced lemon cake, treasured meatloaf, boundless supply of peanuts and York Peppermint Patties, or a surplus of cheese from McQuade's—she was always equipped for a feast. In agreement with Charles M. Schulz, of the Peanut cartoons, 'All you need is love...but a little chocolate now and then doesn't hurt.'" Amen to that. God made chocolate...and it was very good.

When I do a funeral, I always want to include the words of Jesus when he told his disciples, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so would I have told you I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that where I am, you also may be" (John 14:1-3) There is something good for us after this life. We will be with Jesus in our Father's house, in our heavenly home. As we are told in Revelation 21, the God who created this good world way in Genesis one will one day bring new creation to this whole entire world. God will wipe every tear from our eyes. On that day there will be no death or mourning or crying or pain. This is the good news I try to share with grieving people. When this life ends a new and beautiful and peaceful and joyful and wonderful life begins with our Lord Jesus and with our Heavenly Father. And that new life is good...very good.

What I find so meaningful about funerals is the very ones who gather to grieve often tell me, in their own way, that they know this good news already. You all do the same thing. Here I stand week by week telling you good news, but so often you tell me how God has worked in your life, in ways that are so good they even redeem the sadness and the sorrow. Well, that sister-in-law who said the woman who died had welcomed her into the family some 50 years ago, she had some good news she wanted me to know. Over their 50 years of being family, she said they had many nice visits. And then she wrote, "I am looking forward to my next visit with her...because I know she will be waiting to welcome me to her peaceful place where we will be gathered together with all of our loved ones." Isn't that an amazing promise? We will have a next visit with our loved ones, with our Lord, with all the saints of God. And when we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be.

God hasn't hijacked the airwaves yet...he hasn't commandeered a satellite...yet...he hasn't interrupted the nightly news...yet. But one day God will roll back the heavens and all creation will see his glory and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and all things will be made new and the sting of death will be removed and we will all be filled with a deep and abiding joy that will last forever. And it will all be good. It will all be so very good.