

A Redeemable World

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When Adam asked me a few months ago to talk about what I've learned in seminary I was a little nervous because seminaries have this reputation for being more like cemeteries. So I don't want you to think that today is just going to be me regurgitating 3 years worth of seminary classes, but rather, I'd like to talk a little about how those classes shaped and influenced me personally. And really, I want to talk about how seminary has changed the way I understand the world.

There's a hymn we sing here once in a while, "This is My Father's World" (**SLIDE 1**). And over the last several months its come to my attention that some of our musicians--I won't mention any names--don't really like the hymn very much. But we sing it not just because I like it, but because I think it rings true with the story that I've come to see unfolding in the pages of Scripture. And its my hope that after today, this hymn will be much more meaningful for us all.

I grew up hearing and learning the gospel on pretty regular basis: that because Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, I'm a sinner, and my sin condemns me before a holy God, and that only Jesus' death on the cross can bring forgiveness and the gift of eternal life. This should sound familiar. And this is true, but what I've come to realize over the last several years is that this is one part of a larger story, and that the story doesn't actually start with, "I'm a sinner" but with "I'm an image-bearer."

When I say image-bearer I'm talking about Genesis 1--in the beginning when God creates man and woman to bear his image--they are image-bearers. But when we start with, "I'm a sinner," we're already in Genesis 3 with Adam and Eve and the serpent, we've skipped over the beginning of

the story. The Bible starts with Genesis 1 for a reason. When we miss it, it's like starting a book by opening to the middle. But it's the beginning (Genesis 1) that holds the rest of the story together. In the same way we're born into this world in sin, we're also born as human beings made in the image of God. And we are image-bearers first, then we are sinners. So I've learned to root myself in Genesis 1, I've learned that everything, even the gospel itself, begins there. Let's take a look--

Creation: A World of Wonder

Genesis 1 is a story I knew so well going into seminary, that it had sort of lost its magic--day, night, sun, moon, trees, birds, animals, humans. God makes it and says it's good, so what's the big deal? I learned that more than just God making stuff, Genesis 1 & 2 are about God setting up the world so that all of its parts work together properly: the sun and moon work in rhythm to separate night from day. And the plants and trees produce food for all the living creatures. Each piece is assigned purpose and function, and brought together to create this world of wonder and beauty that is orchestrated by the Creator himself. And in the middle of it all stand the ones who bear the image. And the function they are given, was more significant than I'd ever known.

SLIDE 2-- "God created human beings in his own image...God blessed them and said to them, '**Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over** the fish of the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'"

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden **to work it and take care of it.**"

The image bearers, women and men, those who are co-rulers with God, the overseers of God's creation. I grew up with this idealic picture of the Garden of Eden in my head. I imagined Adam and Eve just lounging around without any clothes, relaxing and eating like they were at some resort, but in these two verses, we see that the calling of God's image-bearers is much larger than that. It says, "Be fruitful, fill the earth, rule over the creation, work it and take care of it. God gives them a job to do. He wants them to use their skills and their gifts to unwrap the world's potential and bring flourishing and peace to all creatures on the earth. God says, the earth is ready to be inhabited, so go to work filling it with families and civilizations and cities.

When it says "rule over" its not ruling in the sense that we get to use our power to do whatever we want. But rulers in the sense that we've been given responsibility and purpose by our Creator to represent him--to care for every part of his creation, including one another, the way he would care for it. God makes us his image-bearers and says, go with the skills and gifts that I've given you--gifts like curiosity and strength, creativity and logic--go and use them wisely to make every part of my world flourish, to discover all that it has to offer.

So I've learned that Genesis 1 isn't just talking about God creating the flowers and birds and trees--but also about God giving them all a proper function. And the proper function of the image-bearer is to rule God's world; human beings are are called to use their God-given gifts and abilities to bring order and take care of the creation, but also, following in the footsteps of their Creator, they're called to nurture and create new things, things that don't yet exist.

Can you imagine what this means? Obviously our world today is a result of humans using their gifts and skills, of course, they're not always used

wisely, but nevertheless, human beings have filled the world with language and literature, and music, families and governments, farms and cities? This is all what we call culture, human beings are culture-makers, and this is God's idea. He expects that as they multiply and spread through the earth, exercising their gifts and working as little creators, his human image-bearers will fill the earth with their unique ideas and contributions. Think of institutions like schools and businesses and universities--these are all products of human invention--but even our ability to think and reason and create these kinds of things comes from God. How do we know that something is beautiful, why do we hunger for justice, what makes us laugh with joy--All of this, writes one theologian, is part of the rich texture of God's creation.

This is my father's world, I rest me in the thought
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas; his hand the wonders wrought.

God created it all, in other words, he deserves the credit.

In the words of Psalm 24

SLIDE 3 - "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."

Why does this matter? I think it matters for a couple of reasons:

First of all, when we don't take Genesis 1 seriously, we have the tendency of looking at everything that's gone wrong with the world, and seeing nothing but evil. The world's just spinning out of control, and there's nothing we can do about it but sit back and hope the Lord returns soon.

But I've learned that when we stay a little longer in the story of Creation, when we grasp the enormity of this text, it will fill us with wonder and move us to worship. God's fingerprints are all over our world, in the very ordinary

events and encounters of our day--if we have the eyes to see it. The hymn says in verse 2: "This is my Father's world, he shines in all that's fair." You'll notice as you read this hymn that the writer really sensed God's presence in nature (the rustling grass, the rocks and trees and skies and seas). But Genesis 1 also tells us we should also expect to see signs of God's creation in our culture--not only in the colors of autumn leaves but also in the colors of a painting, or in a well-designed logo or building. In the powerful roar of a waterfall, but also in the graceful movement of a dancer. So Genesis 1 helps us see God reflected in ordinary places and circumstances where others might look and see nothing significant at all.

Second, Gen 1 gives new purpose to our work. And this is a big one. Genesis 1 shows us that work itself is not a curse, that it's part of God's original design. Human beings were assigned to work before Adam and Eve took the fall into sin. And work is included in the "God saw all that he had made and it was very good." So when we do our work with wisdom and creativity and precision, though not perfectly, we are still being image-bearers, we are living into our true calling to care for and bring flourishing to God's world.

Take a fresh look at this verse we hear so often. Proverbs 3:6

⁶In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

In all your ways, it doesn't matter so much what you're doing, as it does how you do it. In all your ways: as you're doing good police work, as you're teaching in the science classroom, as you're engineering buildings, or parenting a child or working in government, acknowledge him--You see what this means? We might think if we're not working in full-time ministry that we're working in the secular arena. But when we take Genesis 1 seriously, we see that these are not secular jobs--they are sacred, because

they are opportunities for us to image the infinite wisdom, brilliance and creativity of our God and to bring flourishing to his world. This is something we need to think much more about as Christians because I think the majority of Christians don't understand their work as being significant in God's eyes. The message of creation is that every career that adds to the goodness and peace of our world is a sacred vocation and calling, and brings glory to God when its done well.

Genesis 1 and 2 helped me to recognize that God's world in all its facets, both creation and culture, is good. It's good because it is all made by and held together by a good Creator who loves his world no matter what. So when Adam and Eve fall into sin, it doesn't change this fundamental truth: That the world is good and it belongs to God.

Fall

Sin is a menacing, destructive force and it adds a layer of complexity to God's world. I mentioned earlier that the gospel I heard growing up always started with "I'm a sinner" and I think the reason for that is because its an easy way for us wrap our minds around what happened with Adam and Eve. "Just look at your heart, look at your own life" and its all the evidence you should need to realize just how broken the world is--just how big the problem of sin is. Clearly something terrible has happened, as a result, God's good world is now also a fallen world. Before sin, human beings ruled God's world in glory. But now we fall short. Sin, like a computer virus, has worked its way into every sphere of creation, infecting you and me, and through us, its become embedded in our human institutions and our environment.

SLIDE 4 - We see this in the curse of Genesis 3--the ground will now produce thistles and thorns and Adam will have to work extremely hard for food. Work is now more complicated and frustrating rather than bringing

pleasure and purpose. Maybe some of us can relate more to Genesis 3 than Genesis 1 & 2?

SLIDE 5 - Romans 8 talks about “all creation groaning under the weight of sin, waiting to be liberated.”

You see what’s happened here. This decision by Adam and Eve to go against God’s design, to live outside of their proper function--has affected every part of our world. No part is left untouched. Because Adam and Eve didn’t use the power God gave them the way it was meant to be used, sin has taken hold and set up its own kingdom.

And with the spread of humanity across God’s creation, goes the spread of sin. Instead of taking care of one another, like Cain was supposed to care for and be the keeper of Abel, we now look out for our own good, for ways to control one another. Our relationships and families, our cultural and political institutions as a result become fractured, something other than what God intended for them to be. Think of the inequality in our education system, think of the corruption in our governments. These are all systems and institutions, meant for good, that to some degree or another, are out of whack, they’re malfunctioning. And this extends even to the way we as image-bearers treat God’s world. Instead of cultivating and caring for the earth, we’ve learned to exploit it and abuse it for our own selfish purposes. We extract and use its resources without any thought about what the consequences might be of such wasteful consumption.

Sin affects every dimension of God’s world because the role of the image-bearer is so central to God’s purposes--they were to be the rulers and caretakers of all creation--when they mess up, it has devastating ramifications for the rest of God’s world. When they don’t exercise their

gifts wisely, and faithfully, the whole world suffers. So the problem starts with human beings but very quickly spreads into every sphere of creation.

Sin, I've learned, is more comprehensive and far-reaching than I ever thought. It isn't just something that makes me guilty before God. It is that, but it's also more than that. Sin makes everything in our world out of whack. It's what happens when something that was part of God's good creation is used in a way it was never intended to be used. Sin goes against God's established patterns and designs for creation. But here's what this doesn't mean. It doesn't mean we can abandon God's creation or hide from our culture. God certainly hasn't. We need to name the problem of sin for what it is. It's taking what's good and beautiful and using it, perverting it and twisting it in ways that violate its original function.

I think about how our culture is obsessed with sex. It's taken on a life of its own, becoming an obsession, when it was never meant to function that way. Sex is God's idea, it is good and it is intended to be this intensely relational encounter. But as a result of sin, it's been distorted and perverted, turned into a game that's all about what's in it for me. It's blown completely out of proportion. And Christians, for the most part, are ashamed to talk about it. From the way we treat it, you would think the whole idea of sex is wrong. But it's not. And we can affirm with Genesis 1, that no matter how distorted it has become in our culture, that sex, when it's used in the right way, is fundamentally good because God made it.

It's the same thing with music and dance and money and power. These things are not sinful in themselves. It's when they become distorted, when we hoard our money or spend it wastefully, when we abuse our power, or misuse music or dance--when we use them in ways God never meant for them to be used that they become wrong.

Imagine I have a son. I don't really, but you can imagine I do. I want him to participate in this soapbox derby because its something I feel he would have fun with. So I design a car just for him, getting all the right measurements so that it fits him perfectly, and he'll be able to navigate the race track without any troubles. I build the car: the seat, the brakes, the steering wheel, the levers, each piece is perfectly adjusted for him. He loves the car, and I watch with satisfaction as he takes it out for test runs on the sidewalk and learns to use all the features. But one day, instead of riding it on the sidewalk, he decides he wants to use the car as a boat, so he takes it off the street and goes plunging into the pond in the park, where he is quickly disappointed by its performance. He comes to me soaking wet, and complaining that the car didn't float. Not only does the car not float, but the water has caused the gears to rust and some of the wood to warp and so it doesn't drive completely straight anymore. So what am I left to do? I'm not just going to throw the car away and start over. Its salvageable. We can change out some of the equipment and replace the warping wood. But there's another problem, my son still has it in his heart to use the car in ways it wasn't meant to be used. If I want my son to flourish with his car, I have to deal with my son's heart. He has to learn to see the beauty of driving the car the way its supposed to be driven. Otherwise, he'll just keep getting himself into dangerous and destructive situations.

So here's where we're left: God has designed our world, and designed us to function within it in certain ways, ways that lead to flourishing for all creation, but we've rejected those ways. We left the sidewalk and drove God's world into the pond. But, keep in mind, a fallen world is not a throwaway world in God's eyes. It can be salvaged, or the Bible's word of choice, "Redeemed."

Redemption

This is the good news of the gospel. That through Christ, God is actively reclaiming his world from the destructive powers of sin. Just like creation and just like the fall, I've learned that God's redemption is vastly larger than I ever imagined. It is cosmic, it's nothing less than the restoration and renewal of all creation. If you've been with us over the last month or so, we've been talking about it as the New Creation. God putting things right at last, making all things new again in Christ. But its not new as in, starting from scratch, its more like re-newal, revitalization. If we look at the words the biblical writers use to talk about salvation--we'll very soon realize that most of them...

SLIDE 6: "restoration, renewal, redemption, reconciliation, new creation--

...imply a return, a going back to an original state. Redemption, means to buy back what was lost. Redemption is about God reclaiming and rescuing all creation from its bondage to decay and death. Reconciliation is about restored relationship. God is making us his family again. See, God's redemption not adding something new, its about the removal of sin so that the flourishing and peace of Genesis 1 & 2 can be restored. Redemption is the gathering up of all creation--plants, animals, people, every living thing, and all of culture--languages, literature, families, schools, governments--and restoring all of it to its rightful purpose, so that all the earth can resound again with songs of praise to the Creator.

This quote from a theologian named Al Wolters gets to the heart of it. He says "If sin is about the distortion of creation, salvation is its recovery in Christ. Creation comes back with a vengeance."

And so when Jesus comes onto the scene, he says things like "the Kingdom of God is upon you." In other words, Jesus is saying, I'm here to reestablish God's reign on earth, to announce to all the powers, and prince

of darkness, that they are. And when I come back, Jesus rules on God's behalf, Jesus spreads the blessing and flourishing of God to all creation. And as a way of demonstrating this, Jesus feeds the hungry, heals the sick and the blind, even raises the dead. Jesus demonstrates in the midst of a still fallen world, what it will be like when all creation is restored and is living again under the gracious rule of the Creator God. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain.

And there's another part to this: when creation is restored, God's people are restored as image-bearers. They're restored as God's rulers, and they're empowered to do so because Christ has broken the power of sin that sent us off track in the first place. Because of sin, we fall short of the glory of God, we failed to accurately represent our Creator, but the good news, in the words of N.T. Wright, is that "In the new heavens and the new earth, those who belong to Jesus will share his sovereign rule over his new world." We'll be raised to glory with Christ, and recover our calling to rule on God's behalf. Though the kingdom isn't fully here, Paul tells us the Holy Spirit acts as a downpayment on the new creation--the Spirit even now is at work renewing our hearts and minds--teaching us the habits and ways of the new creation, and molding us into the image of Christ, so that we can live again as image-bearers.

A couple of things to notice:

When we pray the words "your kingdom come, your will be done" we're praying for nothing less than the restoration of all creation. It's not only about people's souls being saved, its about our bodies and minds and souls together, being redeemed from sin, about the whole creation being renewed and brought from death to life.

Redemption has profound implications for our work. Just as our work became toilsome because of sin, the redemption of Christ redeems it. It

can be good again, it can be what God intended it to be--something that brings us deep satisfaction, something that contributes toward the goodness and flourishing of God's world, and when it does, it points like a sign to the new creation.

It also means we can be involved, (should be) involved, in the cultural and social renewal of our city--through business initiatives that provide employment, through the arts and education. God cares about all of this, because all of it, creation and culture, belongs to him. This is part of the reason we started the pray and break bread events last fall. We want to open our eyes to the ways God is working to redeem every sphere of our city through Christ, and watch for ways we can be a part of it. Praying for our neighborhood is one way that we take care of this gift God has given us.

This also part of why we added enrichment activities to the Summer Splash program this year. Because God cares about art and music and science and writing--these are gifts from him. And even now, while we wait for the second coming of Christ, we are called to reclaim them, to use them wisely and creatively, to bring him glory.

“This is my father's world--every part of it--why should my heart be sad, the Lord is King, let the heavens ring. God reigns, let earth be glad.”