

*The Scripture comes to us this morning in video format from The Work of the People.
<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/it-was-good>*

Last Sunday, after church, Caroline and I met up with two friends in Salem and drove together to Bend, Oregon. I bought four concert tickets as my birthday present to myself and assembled a crew to take in the concert with me. As we drove to Bend the air got thicker and thicker with smoke. And we were shaken by all the evidence of fire damage all around us. We had kn95 masks and we were hoping to make the best of it, but shortly after we arrived and were unloading in our cabin for the night, we heard the concert was cancelled due to air quality issues. Of course. The singer endured poor air quality the night before (when the air was slightly better) and she was paying for it. She couldn't do it again. This was a relatively minor disappointment in a year and a half of so much disappointment. But it was genuinely disappointing. And it was genuinely hard to breathe in Bend a week ago.

Four years ago we began a new year of the Narrative lectionary where the Narrative Lectionary always begins, in the Book of Genesis, on the Sunday after Labor Day. In year four, the Narrative Lectionary begins at the very beginning, with the first creation story in Genesis 1 and 2. And four years ago I began by noting that it had been hard to breathe that week— literally, given the thick smoke in the air from the fire in the gorge; and spiritually, given the ravages of Hurricane Irma, and North Korea's sixth nuclear test, and battles over immigration, and conflict erupting on streets as battles with white supremacy unfurled, and in the midst of the very real grief in St. A's with so many losses in the year prior. Well... is it so different now? Mercifully the air quality in Portland has been ok, but we know that is not the case in much of the state and on much of the west coast right now. And so many are in icu beds right now fighting for every breath. The Delta Variant is making it hard for many to breathe— literally and spiritually. And news of another Hurricane, another earthquake, more international strife... and painful memories of that dreadful day in September 20 years ago yesterday... and grief over the 20 year war that resulted, that has only now ended messily... And meanwhile we're smarting as we return to virtual worship, and wear masks indoors and out, or have returned to personal lockdown. We had such hopes for this fall, and so many of those

Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.

hopes have been crushed. Did you see the New Yorker cartoon that was circulating on social media of late? One pummeled with lemons and weary of lemonade?

So now, just as it was four years ago, focusing on the poetry of Genesis 1 and the beginning of Genesis 2 might feel a bit dissonant. Our Bibles begin with a poetic celebration of God as the source of all that is... and a poetic affirmation of the goodness of God's creation, all of God's creation— living and non-living— every creature, every dimension of creation, every human being created in the image of God... Through this poetry we affirm that this world, this universe, it all belongs to God. And it is all beloved of God.

We look around right now, gasping for breath, and it might be hard to throw ourselves into this affirmation. But let's remind ourselves of what we've learned before — this poem wasn't written at the beginning of all that is... nothing was, of course. It wasn't even written at the beginning of the history of the people of Israel... it was written during the exile of the people of Israel— when their kingdom had crumbled, their temple had been destroyed, their leaders dispersed to foreign lands... It was written at a time when it may have been hard for Israel to catch their breath— the ruach— the Spirit of God.

And yet the Spirit flowed through them into the poem with which our Bible begins... I appreciate this interpretation of the beginning of Genesis offered by the curriculum we use for worship planning and children's ministry, I quote- "It is not ever meant to be an explanation of creation but an answer to a question asking the faithful remnant: do you still believe your God is powerful enough to protect you? When in exile you can let God go or let God grow, rethinking who God is in a strange and foreign land. This poem, written when they had to rethink what they believed about God now that God's indestructible house, Jerusalem and the temple, had been destroyed. This poem is a loud shout and faithful response to that question with the answer: 'Yes! We do!'"

So it is good for us to return to the beginning because this too is a moment when we, a faithful remnant, are asked "Do you still believe your God is powerful enough to protect you?" It is a moment for letting God grow, for affirming that this world, this

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universe, and everybody and everything in it is God's good creation, in God's hands. If
Israel could do it in exile, we can do it today.

So we continue to worship, even on-line. So we will find ways to bring more special
music into our worship. So we will continue to serve our neighbors, particularly our
most vulnerable neighbors. We begin anew today— all of us— because we believe in God
our creator, revealed in Jesus our Savior, experienced by the breath of God that moves
through us— the Holy Spirit. Take a moment to breathe right now. Deeply. Again.
Again. Again.

Know that this world belongs to God.

Know that this church belongs to God.

Know that you belong to God.