

God's Amazing Creation

The Fourth Sunday in Lent—March 14, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Our Scripture lesson is about the beauty of God's handiwork. What comes to your mind when I mention God's handiwork? Your thoughts probably turn quickly toward images of natural beauty—sunsets, mountains, rainbows, flowers and beautiful landscapes. You may even have a calendar at home with the title "The Beauty of God's Creation" with each page offering a gorgeous photograph of the wonders of nature. Such are the images which we associate with the beauty of God's handiwork, and indeed each of these wonders of the natural world glorifies God with their attractiveness, but our lesson tells of things with a beauty that far surpasses all that nature has to offer. It is a wonderful thing to relish the beauty of nature, but it is a great disservice to our God when we speak as though this is the only or greatest beauty which God creates. God is doing a work of much great beauty and majesty. In fact, it is a twofold work. I am referring to the second chapter of Ephesians and the marvelous work which God is doing in the likes of you and me! Many resist this affirmation and refuse to believe that this can be true, but let us look at the story as God presents it to us.

It is most understandable that people would doubt that humans are God's great masterpiece. God created us in His image, but as we know from Genesis three, things quickly took a bad turn and now we have a rebellious human race and a deeply troubled world. Paul has no illusions about humanity and immediately explains the bad shape that we were in. *You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.* Paul is blunt, and some would say extreme, in his assessment of the human situation, but our rebellion separated us from God, the source of true life. In spiritual terms we are dead, we are all mortal and will eventually die physically, and as Paul points out, we are caught up in the ways of a dying world system. This is the material that God lovingly chose to work with when He wanted to make an amazing creation, and it would seem that such a transformation would be an impossibility.

As Paul explains the human condition the situation looks darker and darker, and then there comes a sudden and glad turn. *But God...*, writes the Apostle. That wonderful *But* changes everything! The ways of the world all would spiral downward toward final disaster, *But God* interrupts! *But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.* Paul is speaking in wonderfully simple terms. Ephesians is not an easy read and much of the doctrinal detail of this epistle requires very careful attention, but here he speaks with sweet simplicity. We have been joined with the crucified and risen Christ. Just as Jesus was raised from death to life, so Jesus has raised us up with Him! Paul tells of an even more glorious destiny: *and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.* We look forward to life beyond this present world when we will be taken into the heavenly realms with Christ, but note that Paul is speaking of more than the future. Even now, as we walk with Christ as loyal disciples, we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. Our place is set at the table!

So God took us when we were dead and raised us up to a glorious new life. In Christ we have become a new creation. We are God's masterpiece. I love how the New International Version translates verse ten: *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus.* The next time you see a beautiful sunset or a colorful spring flower bursting forth, give praise to God, and then remind yourself that you are an even lovelier creation of God. You are God's handiwork! By human means this is impossible, but we are not transformed by human means. Paul is emphatic: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* Granted, few of us feel like lovely creations. We have spent too long in a world which has often succeeded in

convincing us that we are ugly, when we are actually beautiful, that we are stupid, when we have received great wisdom from God, and that we are untalented, when God has actually gifted us in countless ways. We are God's beautiful creation.

And this work of creation is not complete! God has given each of us a purpose and great works to do. Hear again verse ten: *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do."* There is a lot more creating to do, and we are given the assignment of doing it! We were created to do good works. Just as God lovingly created and gave life, we are to also perpetuate that life giving work. Years ago, I heard preachers speak of how we are God's hands in this earth and how God longs to work through us. This is the message Paul is presenting. It is obvious that there is work to be done in this world. There is poverty and sadness all around us. There is a community of people that need to hear Good News and a Church which needs to be staffed for this saving work. The needs always feel overwhelming, but this must not blind us to the positive things which we can be doing as God's hands. It is up to us to use our time, talents and treasures, that is, our attention, skills and financial resources to advance this Kingdom.

For a moment it may be exhilarating to hear that "we are God's hands," but as we look at the shape our world is in and the amount of work before us this exhilaration can quickly turn to doubt and discouragement. "How can I do all that is needed? How can I advance a Kingdom when I can barely keep my own house in order?" we might ask. Our great hope is found in Paul's explanation of these great works. *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.* God has presented us with tasks and has also given us the ability to do them. When we say that God has a plan for our lives, it does not mean only that God has a job, spouse and home planned for us, but there is Kingdom work specially prepared for us and awaiting our attention.

When God's people are confronted with this teaching there comes a defensiveness and denial. "But I am not talented. I cannot do great things." It is easy for all of us to make long lists of the things at which we lack talent, but God does not buy this! It is all too easy to look at the life of world-famous saints and their mighty works for God and to then feel inadequate in comparison. I had a friend who was constantly reading biographies of great Christians who were pioneer missionaries and outstanding preachers. While these life stories can be deeply inspiring, the problem is that they can also be intimidating. Let us rejoice in the extraordinary accomplishments of extraordinary people, and let us remember also that we are ordinary people! It is with fondness that I remember a professor who frequently reminded us seminarians that we may need a few grand heroes to inspire us, but we need many more role models—ordinary godly people living solid lives of service—to guide us, for this is how God delights to work.

We must be careful not to denigrate the work of ordinary Christians, for the ordinary work that we do is actually extraordinary! Consider the work which we do for the Lord. We bless and encourage our families and do all we can to sustain them. We offer the love of Christ to a sad and glum world. Every week I see incredible works of God done in this very place. Can you see them? I see a worship team lifting the spirits of a world-weary congregation. I hear words of care and encouragement exchanged. I see students of all ages built up with God's truth. Young people who struggle with the confusion and anxiety that are so much a part of growing up are given a sense of belonging and value. Children learn that Jesus loves them. How easy it would be for me to go around this sanctuary and tell you the wonderful ways that God is working through each and every one of you. What will it take for us to finally believe that God is doing mighty things through us and longs to do even more?

Think of the skills which God has taught us through our lives. We learn work skills, and much of this involves learning to be a team player and a blessing to others. Family is an ongoing academy of training in human nurture and encouragement. As we make ourselves available to God, we learn a host of new skills. As we step forward to teach or lead in the congregation, or as we volunteer for *Lunch with Luke* or with a community ministry, we learn a host of new skills. These are not always easy lessons, but they are important ones and we dare not miss out on such crucial training.

As believers we often feel feeble in our attempts at ministry. We are our own worst critics and love to tell ourselves that we are not sufficient for the task. We would love to help troubled people but we do not feel like we know enough psychology. We would love to teach but feel that we are untrained as educators or as Bible scholars. Special training is nice, but truth be told, ninety percent of the blessings we give in life have to do with simply loving people in whatever situation. We love to compare ourselves with professionals and then feel badly for our alleged inadequacies and yet it is the amateurs who can often minister most powerfully. Years ago, a Methodist Church in Hopewell ran an annual Passion Play performed at an amphitheater in the back of the Church grounds, and completely run by members of that congregation. I have seen the presentation twice, and for reasons which I cannot fully explain I have found this amateur dramatic work—and yes, at moments it may have looked amateurish—to be more moving than any other professional production that I have seen! Why is this? I believe that it has to do with the Spirit of God working most powerfully through ordinary people.

Through Christ's death and resurrection, we have been raised, transformed, and sent out to do God's work. As God has re-created us, we are to be His creative people, re-creating the world to be more and more like the Kingdom. How creative are you feeling? I can already tell you of the gifts and powers which God has given you. Are you willing to embrace those supernatural powers and put them to even greater use? As you all know I have long been a believer in the importance of studying our own lives and of charting out the directions and purposes of our walk on this earth. Some

may look at such endeavors and see them only as a self-indulgent amusement, but this is not so! We do well to study our lives that we might be more aware of the skills and experiences God has given us, and of the directions which God may want us to pursue. We need to ask ourselves, as one seeker once asked, "What has God meant by me?" This is important business!

We are also wise to continually cultivate and expand our pool of skills that we might use them in Christ's service. This Wednesday evening, we will gather for a Lenten session which will again involve crafts, and to some this may seem like a light amusement. I believe that this is serious business! We frequently present our young children with crafts to keep them entertained and help them develop skills. This is a good thing. The problem is that we forget that for the same reasons, people of all ages should be challenged to learn new skills! As we work with paint, ink, graphite and crayon we discover abilities and joys of which we were previously unaware. Not only that but we shall be reminded of how these skills can be pressed into service for Christ as these thank you notes which we shall be creating shall be sent out as a work of encouragement.

Dare we show up and get our hands a little dirty? Dare we fail at a few attempts before we find our real talent? This is a picture of how we develop as servants of Christ. One of the great virtues of the Scout program is that it introduces young people to all kinds of new tasks and endeavors, and like any new experience there is some anxiety in jumping into the unfamiliar. The truly great and gifted scouts were not necessarily the smartest ones or the ones with many natural talents. They were the ones who would freely and willingly jump into any new opportunity. This sense of initiative and adventure makes all the difference in their Scouting career and would serve them well all their lives. Can we be a little more like these Scouts in our work for the Lord?

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. Through Jesus' atoning death and victorious Resurrection God has done a great work in all of us, raising us up to life and service. Now it is time for us to keep God's work going!