

Supremely Good

We begin our summer worship series this morning with the grand words of the first creation account from Genesis. “In the beginning,” it reads. It is rich poetry, with grand sweeping images of God’s artistry in shaping creation. This is not a play-by-play, of course. There is no one filming creation on her iPhone or taking notes like a court reporter. No, instead this account is written down while the ancient Israelites are in exile, torn from their home and their beloved Temple after the fall of Jerusalem. And it is written by a people surrounded by those who worship other gods, gods who are vastly different from the one proclaimed here:

And [as one scholar notes] these deities were fickle. According to the Babylonian myth, *Enuma Elish*, they created humans, or at least some of them did. But at the same time, they [later] regretted the decisions and schemed to destroy the human race because we were too ‘noisy.’ These deities would battle, kill, enslave and retaliate against each other, and humans were often caught in the midst of these disputes.¹

Into this worldview comes the understanding of the one true God, the Creator of sea and sky, of trees, plants, birds, creeping things, and human beings. Those human beings are created “in God’s image,” the crowning moment of creation, some would say. And, like the rest of creation, God takes a good, long look at humanity and declares them, declares us, good. We are part of a creation that God completes and declares “supremely good,” in the words of the Common English Bible.

Things do not seem to be supremely good at the moment, at least not in an easy way. Uncertainty and impatience swirl around changing data about the virus and the changes in what we can and cannot do, should and should not do. And over the past few weeks we have once again been made achingly aware of the danger of being a person of color in this nation even now, over 400 years since the first ship carrying enslaved Africans landed on American shores. A few weeks ago, I watched a video of a black man with a deep voice and dreadlocks and a beard sprinkled with gray. The video begins with the words, “Before you call the [police]...”²

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4477

² <https://www.facebook.com/Upworthy/videos/2064630276901785/>

The man then goes on to tell those watching a bit about who he is. He detests bananas, and he has never been to prison. He says he is a vegetarian, and he's not proud of that. He says he has also done goat yoga, and he is really not proud of that. He grew up in Las Vegas but is required by his family to cheer for Alabama, unless he wants to be disowned. He shares this video as a way of helping the viewer get to know him, to humanize himself for them, for me. It is lovely in a way, and yet, it is also maddening. He should not have to tell me these things for me to see him as a fellow human being. He is created in the image of God, just as much as I am, just as much as my child is, just as much as my next door neighbor is, but the troubling truth is that he cannot bank on my seeing him that way. He cannot trust that I will not see him as a threat if I saw him walking down my street. He cannot trust that I will see him as another human being, created in the image of God. Writer Clint Smith has written, "The violence of racism is that it makes you believe that you have to be someone other than yourself in order to be loved."³ And that is not good, let alone supremely good.

And yet, God does not step away from calling creation good. In the next creation account, we hear about humanity's insistence on turning against God and breaking God's heart. But God never takes back the good. Yes, we manage to mess up and disappoint God at every turn. We have for generations. God demands that we do better, that we be better, and God seems to think there is something worth saving, something good in us. God does grow weary of us; the story of the Ark tells us that. At times, God even regrets our creation, scripture tells us, and yet God does not wipe the slate entirely clean. God gives humanity another chance in Noah. Unlike other gods worshiped by their neighbors in exile, the people of ancient Israel somehow know that their God has not created them on a whim as a plaything. No, God creates humanity in God's own image for relationship with God and with one another. So, bottom line, in the story of Noah, we are reminded that God sees something in us worth saving, worth redeeming, worth keeping, worth calling back to our supremely good roots, our made-in-God's-image beginnings and the goodness God is determined to see in us and call forth from us.

Shawn Dromgoole is a 29 year old black man who has lived in the same neighborhood in Nashville for his entire life. His family has lived there for 54 years. If you have visited Nashville in the past few years, you may have been there. It's known as 12 South, and it is one of the bustling areas that reflects the city's exploding

³ Clint Smith, author, quoted here: <https://thisisnthappiness.com/post/182800919734/the-violence-of-racism-is-that-it-makes-you>

growth and change. It also used to be a primarily black neighborhood. With gentrification, that has changed. In light of the stories of Trayvon Martin and Ahmaud Arbery and others, Shawn has grown increasingly and understandably wary of going for a walk in his predominantly white neighborhood. This has been heightened by posts on the Nextdoor app for his neighborhood warning about sightings of “suspicious black men.” One day, he reached the point where he planned to go for a walk but could not get beyond his front porch. He posted this along with hashtags: #icantsleep #icantbreathe #icantwalk. His neighbors, people he had never had a conversation with before responded and asked if they could walk with him:

Last Thursday afternoon, Dromgoole notified his neighbors that he was going for a walk at 6 p.m., and anyone who wanted to join him was welcome. Dromgoole tied his shoes, ventured off his porch and walked to the meeting spot in a nearby parking lot. There he found 75 people waiting for him. ‘I was so overwhelmed, I still can’t find the words,’ said Dromgoole. ‘I never wrote that post thinking people would want to walk with me.’ The group strolled for almost an hour together, with Dromgoole leading the way as his neighbors followed closely behind...[Another walk was planned for this past Thursday. Shawn now] wants to take his walks across the nation, starting in Brunswick, Ga., where Arbery was killed; Miami Gardens, Fla., where Trayvon Martin lived before he was fatally shot in 2012; and Cleveland, where Tamir Rice’s life was taken in 2014. ‘I finally feel seen,’ said Dromgoole.⁴

Shawn’s story gives me hope, but it also shows me how much work I still have to do. He should not need to name the struggles he faces in order for me to see him.

In a few moments we will gather around this table in a different way, but some things do not and have not changed: God so loves the world that he sends his son to save it. God so loves the world, not just the parts that get everything just so, not just the parts I like, not just those who look or think or vote or speak or love like me. God so loves the world, the whole of creation, the same wondrous world God breathes into being and calls supremely good. And it is this world into which Christ is born to show us God’s love embodied and up close. And this Jesus, with his brown skin and dark eyes sits at a table knowing he is going to be betrayed by those

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/06/03/black-man-was-afraid-walk-his-gentrified-community-so-75-neighbors-walked-with-him>

dearest to him. He gives thanks to God and shares bread and wine with them. He speaks of his body being given for them and his blood being poured out for them, for me, for us, for all who are created in God's image. Jesus gives his brown body—his supremely good, made-in-the-image-of-God, flesh and blood body—to die on a criminal's cross in order to save me, to save us, to save the entire world and show us all just what God will go through to save us from all that would destroy us. Each and every time we break this bread and share this cup, we point to that. Each and every time we share this meal, we point to him. Each and every time we take this bread and this juice into our flesh and blood, created-supremely-good bodies, we are nourished for the worship of God and the tending of God's beloved world, including serving others who are created in God's image too. It is that simple and that complex. It is one thing for me to speak these truths, but can I bring myself to see them, to know them, and claim them body, mind, and soul? By the grace of God, I hope so, because I do not decide who is worthy of respect. No one has to prove his humanity to me. No one has to demonstrate that she is worthy of life, health, freedom, dignity, justice, love, or joy. I am made in God's image. You are made in God's image. They are made in God's image. God has said so, from the beginning, and it is supremely good, even now.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.