

What Are You Here to Do?: Rejoice in the Goodness of Things

Focus: God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.—Genesis 1:31

I thought what a good thing it was to be alive in a world where silver poplars grow.—George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things—Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*
For existence itself is good, and friends delight in each other's existence.—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IX, Chapter 9

First Scripture Lesson: Genesis Chapters 1 and 2:

Poetry involves repetition—and that's true *within* a poem, as well as for a poem as a whole. *Within a poem*, there are repeated lines—refrains—usually at the end of each stanza.

Robert Frost, *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*: “And miles to go before I sleep. And miles to go before I sleep.” Or Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*: “Quoth the raven: ‘Nevermore.’” “Quoth the Raven: ‘Nevermore.’” The repetition makes the poem more memorable and makes it get inside you—become part of you—who you are and how you see the world.

The first few chapters of Genesis—“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”—if you think of them as poetry, you can hear that same repetition at work.

The point is the goodness of things—the goodness of things that we sang about in our Stewardship hymn, “What Gift Can We Bring?”; the goodness of things that we celebrate in Landen Robert Lee's baptism and every baptism; the goodness of things that you'll hear in Martin Luther's words in our next anthem. The goodness of things: it flows from the goodness of God.

But poetry becomes even more memorable, gets inside you even more, when, after several repetitions, the repeated line changes in some unexpected, subtle but important way. Listen for that now as you listen for God's Word to us, Genesis Chapters 1 and 2:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good;

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation. And God saw that it was good.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be signs for seasons and for days and years . . . Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.”

And it was so. And God saw that it was good.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them;

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, And it was so.

*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was . . . **very** good.*

Second Scripture Lesson: John 15:11-17:

The goodness of things. That's what Jesus came to redeem. Especially, the goodness of us—we human beings who were made in the image of God, but with that image now defaced. And Jesus came not only to restore that image in us, but also to perfect it—so that our joy might be complete.

That is what Jesus means when he says that he he lays down his life for his friends: that even now he still sees and loves the goodness in us and in the world, and will lay down his life for it.

Jesus came into the world, and called us friends, not to condemn the world, but to save it.

And in doing this, Jesus gives us a command: we are to love one another as he has loved us; we are to go out into the world and bear fruit, that is, to love the world and all those in it as he does, and especially we are to love those he calls "the least of these"—the hungry, the homeless, the threatened, and the like—we are to love and serve them in His name.

Listen now for God's Word, the Gospel of John, Chapter 15, verses 11-17, Jesus on the night of his arrest, speaking to his disciples, and to us:

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

Sermon:

"I thought what a good thing it was to be alive in a world where silver poplars grow."

The year is 1937: George Orwell, who would later write the novels, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, has volunteered as an ordinary foot soldier in one of the militias banding together to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War. Of course, there's the chaos and misery of war: the dirt, the noise, the water knee-deep in the trenches, the rats ("big as cats," Orwell says); always short on sleep and food, no boots or blankets, but always lice, rumors, and misinformation, along with pointless and contradictory orders, and the ever-present sicknesses (flu, typhus, skin infections, and the bane of all soldiers, dysentery) and the dying . . . And the fear and the boredom, the boredom and the fear, and still more dying.

Because that's the way our world can be.

But worse than all that, it's begun to dawn on Orwell that these volunteer militias—brave, committed, mostly young, men and women, from all over Spain and the world—they're not going to stop fascism; they're being betrayed by the incompetence and ideological infighting of their own leaders, not to mention the treachery and indifference of those foreign governments who are supposed to be supporting them.

And remember the year, 1937: Orwell already has *some* idea of what it means for Europe and the world if fascism can't be stopped in Spain, although not even Orwell, for all his prophetic insight, could imagine the horrors that lay ahead. Because that's the way our world can be.

And so there he is, early one morning in the trenches: dirty, hungry, tired, cold . . . disillusioned and depressed. Things can't get any worse—can they?—until he makes the mistake of standing up—he knows better than that—and suddenly he has the strange sensation of being at the center of an explosion. A sniper has shot him through the neck.

Once he realizes he's been shot through the neck, he thinks he's done for: he's never known anyone to survive *that*. And then he thinks about his wife, and he's mad at himself: Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! To die like *this* because of a moment's stupidity and because an enemy sniper just happened to be up and watching!

And then he starts to feel pain—lots of pain, and thinks maybe he's not going to die after all, because feeling pain is part of our being alive in our world.

Because that's the way our world can be. And then as they lift him on a stretcher, and start to carry him, we get this:

"I began to be sorry for the four poor devils who were sweating and slithering with the stretcher on their shoulders. It was a mile and a half to the ambulance, and vile going, over lumpy, slippery tracks. I knew what a sweat it was, having helped to carry a wounded man down a day or two earlier."

He's been shot through the throat; it hurts like hell; he can't talk; every time he breathes, he can hear the blood gurgling in his neck; if he's not going to die (and he still might), he's facing a long and uncertain recovery in filthy field hospitals . . . and who's he thinking about? The men carrying his stretcher—and what's he feeling? Compassion for them.

Because that's the way **people** in our world can be. And then, as he's being carried on their shoulders, Orwell gives us this:

"The leaves of the silver poplars which, in places, fringed our trenches, brushed against my face; I thought what a good thing it was to be alive in a world where silver poplars grow."

"What a good thing it is to be alive in a world where silver poplars grow." Because that's the way God made our world—good, good, good . . . No, very good . . .

Even *with* the way our world can be, and even *with* the way our world can be now, it is still good, good, good . . . No, very good. The goodness of things flows from the goodness of God. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

So today: What are we here to do? To remember, to give thanks for, to rejoice in, the goodness of things. In the words of our Stewardship Hymn, we are here to give thanks for the past, present, and future, “when grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing.”

So today: What are we here to do? To baptize Landen Robert Lee, because every baptism affirms the goodness of things, just as every baby is the most beautiful baby in the world, witness, Landen Robert Lee.

So today: What are we here to do? To share Jesus’s friendship with one another and with the world, and especially with the least of these, so that we all may know God’s compassion through our compassion. For existence itself is good, and friends delight in each other’s existence.

So today: What are we here to do? To support the church on Stewardship Sunday with our pledges for the coming year. Because this church needs to be here as a witness to, and a conduit of, the goodness, the very goodness, of things. He has chosen us to bear fruit, fruit that will last, in the world.

So yes, we are here today with our pledges because this church does good things—in the past, in the present, *and* in the future—we *do* love it and we *do* support it. And I’m grateful for that—grateful to you for your support, grateful to God, and grateful to God for you. Thank you.

But even more than that we are here today because of the goodness of things and of God. As the poet says, “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.”

We are here today because this is God’s church and this is God’s world. What a good thing it is to be alive in this church and in a world where silver poplars grow.

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.