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Good
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One of my favorite stories in the Bible is the very first one. The story at the beginning of the Book Genesis. The story about how all of life on earth began. It's a wonderful story, full of joy and wonder. Although sometimes I am disappointed to learn some people see it as a sad story, a story of the fall of humanity. I'm even more disappointed by the people who miss the whole point of the story and try to make it fit with scientific discovery. There is nothing in the Bible that says we should ignore science. Science is important and it doesn't have to be used to disprove religion. It isn't that kind of story. The story in the beginning of the Bible about the beginning of the world is not a story about scientific discovery nor is it about the fall of humankind. It's a much, much bigger, more epic story.

The story of creation begins with what God does with chaos and voids. God dives in headfirst into such situations and enthusiastically creates life. It also reveals God in love with everything God creates. In this story we see God almost giggling with delight at everything God speaks into being: day and night, the sun, moon, and billions and billions of twinkling stars. The powerful ocean full of fantastic creatures as huge as whales, as intriguing as sharks, as cute as penguins and seals, as colorful as clownfish, as weird as starfish and sea cucumbers, as essential as krill and everything in between. The diverse landscapes: vast deserts, high mountain peaks, gently rolling hills, deep valleys, prairies that seem to go on forever. The millions of types of plants: majestic redwood and towering oak trees, weeping willows, deep green evergreens, the many flowering trees like dogwood, the bushes and tall prairie grasses, the brave daffodils that can bloom in the snow, bright tulips, fragrant roses, delightful morning glories, violets, and tiny crocus. The plants that give us nourishment: the various grains, vegetables, and fruits from the hardy carrots and radishes, to asparagus and peppers, to the delicious strawberry and blackberry, peaches, and cherries. The animals that inhabit the lands: the great raptors that soar above it all, the vocal songbirds, the busy bees, gorgeous butterflies, and other insects. The lizards and salamanders and snakes and spiders. The mice and chubby cheeked chipmunks scurrying back and forth from their little dens; the mysterious wolves, gamboling polar bears, regal lions and gorillas, curious kangaroos, sweet hedgehogs, adorable otters, masked raccoons, tick eating possums, and foxes, deer, moose, and elk. As anyone who has ever watched a nature documentary knows there are too many amazing creatures to name. And of course human beings, the only creation made in God's own image.

In the story, which reads with the cadence of a poem, after God speaks something into creation, we read that God considers what God just made and then pronounces it good. The sun, moon, and stars are good. The ocean and all the landscapes are good. The rich diversity of plants and animals are good. And humans are good. And all of it together, the whole wide world, God declares with an easy to imagine smile, **is very good**. The word translated *good* is not a bland, dull word. It's a more dramatic word that expresses joy and delight. In other words, God was not emotionally distant from the

world God created. God was deeply invested and enjoyed the world. We even read in the story of creation that God was so very fond of the world every day, in the cool of the evening, God would go for a walk in the world with the first man and first woman. I like to imagine this walk as a leisurely after dinner stroll where everyone enjoyed their surroundings. Maybe they shared stories. Maybe the man and woman told God about what they learned or discovered each day, and maybe God delighted in them and listened to them. Maybe they asked God all kinds of questions and maybe God asked them questions. Maybe they told each other jokes, maybe they laughed together, and sang together. Maybe sometimes they could be quiet together and solemn together. Maybe they enjoyed each other's company. Maybe it was holy. Maybe it was church in the very best sense of the word.

That's the kind of story the first story is. One that sets up God's connection and joy in the world and people God created. One that invites a joyful religious imagination to envision God as so much bigger more real and complex than sour and angry as people who don't read the Bible have told me is what the Bible says God is like. As someone who has and regularly reads the Bible, such commentary makes me wonder who these folks have encountered in order to produce such opinions.

This view, however, might make us wonder how does the Bible go from a story where God not only takes delight in and clearly belongs in the world to Jesus' prayer in today's Gospel lesson from John's Gospel where he expresses he clearly does not belong in the world. It is, after all, in this world where Jesus was betrayed, violently abused, and killed. And after spending time with him, his followers don't belong in the world either. What happened in between the story of the beginning and the prayer of Jesus before his trial, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension that accounts for such a drastic change?

The answer is, as they always say, a long story. And it's an important one. It started with disobedience that got so much worse when the first man blamed God for the choice the man made to disobey God instead of asking to be forgiven for his transgression. That was the beginning of when, as one commentator wrote, humanity "organized itself against its creator." Throughout history humanity continued and continues to work to remake the world in that broken image where the love of God has been replaced with lies that proclaim greed is good, violence and destruction are good, segregation is good, elitism is good, hate is powerful and good. This is the evil that twists the perception of what God created from good to bad, dangerous, something to be feared or exploited for personal gain. Thus relationships tend to be based on transactions of power, security, and physical exploitation instead of simply enjoying and caring for one another. People are dehumanized by falsely determining value for each other based on age, weight, attractiveness, physical fitness, mental health, race, gender, or skills instead of on being a child of God. Resources are twisted into means for a few to get rich at the cost of the environment and people. Land is twisted into politics of who can live where and who can't. Religions, ideas, scientific discoveries, and public health get twisted into perceived threats to personal freedom. I could go on and on, but I'm sure this is enough to give you an idea of how rejecting the love of God and

living for selfish gain has corrupted the beautiful and good world God made and turned it into something less than what God intended. The world that rejected Jesus, as it rejected God's love.

All of this might make us wonder if there is hope. Of course there is hope. That is why Jesus prays the beautiful prayer in today's Gospel. Jesus did not ask God to rescue his followers from the world. Instead he prays for their wellbeing because he is sending them into the world. The same world that still has places and moments of holiness and goodness despite its brokenness. The world God still loves. The disciples are to go into this world to remind the people of the world of our potential for goodness and holiness by being holy people in holy places with all forms of holy life. Holy meaning set aside for God. This, according to Jesus' prayer will end up bringing joy to his followers and to him and to all the world.

This might sound hard to do or even difficult to imagine how to put into practice. And some of you reading or watching this sermon might even be skeptical such a feat is possible. I can think of many examples of people I know who are in the world, but not of the world, which is another way of describing what Jesus is talking about. Since I started this sermon talking about a story I love, a good example that comes to mind is two fictional characters from one of my most beloved novels. Best friends who certainly didn't belong in the world but whose joy and delight of the world and humanity as God created them transcended their personal agendas. I'm talking about the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley from Neil Gaiman and the late Terry Pratchett's funny, poignant, touching, joyous, best-selling novel *Good Omens*.

I know this genre isn't for everyone. I'm aware thousands of evangelicals were offended by the television series based on the book. You have to have a sense of wonder, a sense of humor, and the capacity to laugh at yourself in order to appreciate the story. The authors dedicated the book to none other than theologian and writer G. K Chesterton, so having some theological background helps too. It's too good and well written to be taken literally. But it is about how love - the love of God, the love that is willing to sacrifice for another, love that believes the world doesn't revolve around self-saves us from Armageddon.

Without giving too much of the book away, in the story we learn Aziraphale and Crowley have been in the world from its beginning. Over thousands of years interacting in the world, walking with humans and each other they lose interest in their respective places of origin (heaven and hell) as they grow to love, enjoy, and delight in people and the world, despite its complexities, troubles, and tragedies. Both have little investment in the brokenness, the injustices, the violence and harm people cause. In several parts of the book when Aziraphale inquires if Crowley is responsible for wars or insurrections or other acts of extreme violence, the demon responds humans don't need his influence to enact such atrocities. Despite the harm they witness people are capable of, they both marvel at the good people can do when they choose to and even admire their creativity. Both angel and demon enjoy what God made and see for themselves the goodness and beauty of creation. This shared love of the goodness of the world including the people in

it brings the angel and demon together and they grow to be best friends who love the world and think of it as their home, sharing their labors and joys and each other's company, like a glimpse of the very beginning.

When it is declared by proper authorities the time has come for the promised Great War between heaven and hell that will bring the end of the world, Aziraphale and Crowley decide to do what they can to thwart the plan and the war thus averting the world's end. Despite their best efforts which are fairly comedic and very well intentioned, their plan fails. But their failure makes space for the least likely character in the story (I'm not going to give away everything away) to step up and through this character's deep love for the world that despite not belonging himself he still loves the world and his friends which makes the world his home. With the encouragement and support of Aziraphale and Crowley to act out of this love, he brings about something much more holy and ineffable than Armageddon. Something that looks a lot more like the garden in the beginning of the world. Something good. Which is probably why the authors gave the book the title *Good Omens*.

Today is the last Sunday in the Season of Easter. But it won't be the last time this preacher mentions resurrection. In the season of Easter we are given time to delight in the wonder and mystery and new life the Risen Jesus brings into the world, thus redeeming the world. On Thursday, the church celebrated the feast of the ascension, where Jesus sends his followers into the world to proclaim how to embrace this redemption through repentance and forgiveness. Today we are given the words of Jesus' prayer for his followers that is meant to inspire hope that as they go out into the world as individuals and as the church, they will no doubt experience a world that is both terrible and beautiful, one that will remind them at times they do not belong. When such times occur, Jesus prays his followers will remember their purpose and connection to him and to God and the joy of that connection will help us all better love the world and people of the world.

If you can relate to ever feeling like you do not belong in the world, please know you are in good company. Jesus felt it. His disciples felt it. I sometimes feel it. I'm pretty sure the two friends who wrote the book *Good Omens* must have felt the same way in order to write about two fictional characters who didn't belong in the world and still made it their home. We can learn from the fictional angel and demon, the way to navigate a world where we don't feel like we belong is to remember the goodness that God created, learn to recognize that holy goodness when we see it, love each other and the world and its marvelous diversity more than selfish gain, because you never know who you might influence, and what great goodness might come of living such love. That is still Jesus' prayer for us. It can still be the source of joy in the world. And that is very good.