



“Seeds - Like Dirt”

Genesis 1:1–5, 26–28; 2:7–8

Is this a bad world from which we should seek to escape or a good world awaiting its redemption? And...what does that mean for us?

One can't help but wonder what new suffering the world will inflict on its inhabitants this year. From a pandemic to natural disasters and the threat of world war, the simple question is “Why?” How

could this be? Where is God in all this? Could it be that God isn't really as good and loving as we think? Or perhaps God would like to do something about it, but can't. Perhaps God isn't really as powerful as we think. Over the years, such questions have come to my mind many times and I have a feeling the same is true for you.

A good world, but not a perfect world

A highly-regarded Old Testament scholar, Terence Fretheim, asks us to take a closer look at the creation story. He contends that the world was created good, but not perfect; that the world was created with the expectation of change and growth. In other words, the cosmos created by God was built to be dynamic not static—from the beginning. The dynamism had nothing to do with sin and rebellion; it is just the nature of the fabric from which our world was made.

Here's some of the evidence from the creation accounts.

- God pronounces creation “good” and “very good” at the end of each creating day. But what does it mean? It can't really mean perfection or finality, for after God creates the man, we learn that God recognizes that “it is not good that the man should be alone” and God resolves to make the man a helper (2:18). When the animals prove unsatisfactory helpers, God fashions a woman, using the man as raw materials. All this speaks to growth and change, even to elements of the “not good” being present in the “good” creation.
- When God gives the humans a beautiful garden in which to live, they are also told it is theirs “to till and keep” (2:15). Thus, the garden itself is a place of growth and change that must be tended and worked. It is good but it is not “perfect” or even “complete.” In the context of a garden that must be worked, I'm not even sure what “perfect” means, but it can't mean static or unchanging.
- The most direct evidence of a “good not perfect” creation is from Genesis 1:28. God gives the humans this charge: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and master/subdue it.” Master it?¹ A creation which still must be subdued is far from perfect or complete. Fretheim suggests that the best sense of the Hebrew here is “to bring order out of continuing disorder.” The result of this “subduing” must be that the creation came to look far different than it did on the seventh day, just as it continues to look different each day from the day before.

What is the result of all this? It is a remarkable statement of God's choosing to make humanity partners in the on-going processes of creation. From the beginnings of creation, the humans are given responsibility for God's creation and participate in its on-going dynamism and growth. Fretheim puts it this way: “From the beginning,

¹ This verb (translated “subdue” or “master”) and its derivative occur fifteen times in the Old Testament. It is evidently related to Akkadian *kabāsu* “to tread down,” and Arabic *kabasa* “to knead, stamp, press” (cf. also Arabic *kabasa* “to seize with the hand”). In the Old Testament it means “to make to serve, by force if necessary.” *kābaš* assumes that the party being subdued is hostile to the subduer, necessitating some sort of coercion if the subduing is to take place. (Taken from the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Harris et al., 1999)

God chooses not to be the only one who has creative power and the capacity, indeed the obligation, to exercise it. . . . God is a power-sharing God, indeed a creation-sharing God, and God will be faithful to that way of relating to those created in the divine image.”

In grappling with the difficult theological issues created by natural disasters, we have to begin by recognizing that the cosmos was created as changing and dynamic, even wild and hostile, needing to be subdued. This is a far cry from the placid and idyllic Garden of Eden that is portrayed by most artists. Further this dynamism and wildness is pronounced “good” and “very good” by God. This is how God designed the cosmos and, thus, God is pleased with his creation. How could it be otherwise? Nonetheless, this challenges some of our long-held notions of God’s creative activity as well as our own participation in it.

Good (not perfect) but marred by sin

So, yes, God’s creation is good though it needs to be mastered—overcome. Just think of all the human energy and wealth that has been devoted to slaughtering other humans that could have been focused on overcoming diseases and disaster. God’s creation has been marred by human sinfulness, both by commission and omission. Thus, Paul gets it exactly right in Romans 8:18-21 when he speaks of creation awaiting its own redemption. When? When Jesus returns and the weight of human sin is lifted.

Of course, Jesus hasn’t returned—yet. So the question is what do we do as we too await the consummation of his kingdom? The answer lies in understanding that we are *all* called to do *all* we can to overcome the world and then extend and build upon the goodness in this world. This is the work of us *all*. It is a ministry God has given to *each* of us.