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## Good God

Genesis 1-2:4a

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, June 11, 2017,  
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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“Good God!” is an idiomatic expression of surprise, outrage, horror, disgust, contempt, shock, and even frustration. “Good God!” if you happen to see a totaled car from a horrific car accident on I-40 West as you drive by, rushing to work. “Good God!” as you drive on a two-lane street in Holly Springs and you have the right away, but a car from the other lane, heading in the opposite direction, slides into their turning lane to make a left, and decides to turn as you are approaching them, making you swerve to the right swiftly and speed up in order to avoid an accident. “Good God!” as a car rolls right over a little squirrel on Pope Road. I’m thinking about cars this morning because “Good God!” my 15-year-old daughter is about to get a driver’s permit!

It’s interesting that something which on the surface would appear to be positive—a “good God”—is used linguistically to express something negative. “Good God!” expresses shock when those two words placed together should actually be an informal confession of faith. “Good God.” In those moments of idiomatic use, maybe there’s another way of looking at it. Maybe those two words nestled together form a prayer in those situations, whether consciously or subconsciously—a voiced articulation to God for something good to come out of the situation just viewed or experienced because one is at a loss for words. In this way, “Good God!” wouldn’t be perceived as blasphemous in some way but would take on a different meaning because underlying these words would be a deep belief in a good God, despite what one experiences. The wedding of these two words, even through the lens of Genesis, suggests something about the nature of the God we worship.

So this morning, harkening back to the day of Pentecost where God was central, I want to speak for a little while about God, a worthy subject if I say so myself. I’m drawn to this topic by today’s Genesis reading. We study this scripture not necessarily for its cosmology but for its theology, for what it tells us about God. From the start, you can’t escape God. “In the beginning, God.” God is not only in the beginning but is at the beginning of this reading and the entire biblical canon. “God” is named at least 34 times in this passage, creating an acoustical symphony with God as its musical theme. God, God, God. Someone doesn’t want us to forget God, and that God is the primary subject, the prime mover, in this lesson, but also in our lives, or at least God should be. God is not object. God is subject even though a degree called ‘Master of Divinity’ may lead us to think otherwise. God is primero, the first, the priority of our life of faith. The starting place. If you don’t start there, you will go nowhere spiritually. It’s funny how at times we can try to live a spiritual life without the Spirit, a godly life without God, a Christian life without Christ. God is the beginning of it all; “in the beginning, God.” If God doesn’t act or create, there is no human action or creation. Without God’s breath, there is only death. And so this biblical book of beginnings, reminds us that the genesis of the life of faith is God. The genesis of the world is God. If God never was, we would never be. If God never was, there would be no ‘is.’ But ‘God is,’ as the gospel song says. Our presence in this life is predicated on God’s presence from the beginning till the ending.

This genesis God is a creator and isn’t idle either but a mover and shaker as God brought the world into existence through divine activity. God created. God swept. God said. God saw. God called.

God made. God set. God blessed. God finished and because God wanted a lunch break, God rested “on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.” As subject, God did a lot and that’s an understatement. We serve an active, creative God, who is the source of all life and creates a community of creation. God is anything but boring. As writer Annie Dillard says, “the creator loves pizzazz” and the pizzazz is revealed through the creation of light and darkness, the dome in the midst of waters, the sky and dry land, vegetation, swarms of living creatures, birds and great sea monsters, creeping things and wild animals, including us. God speaks worlds into existence. Repeatedly, “God said....and it was so.” God is a God of creative integrity, fulfilling promises. God’s speaking shapes God’s making. What God says, God does, and this is how God creates this magnificent, fabulous world.

According to poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889),

*This world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed...*

But God doesn’t take a selfish approach to creation. God invites the creation into the creative process. “Let the earth put forth vegetation....” “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures...” “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind....” God invites the earth and the waters and all of creation into a communal creative process, to be fruitful and multiply, that is, to create. God is the creative source of life, the *Creator Spiritus*, and God’s creation is called to be creative.

The source of our creativity is God because God is the chief innovator and entrepreneur, making all things new and creating something new every day. In the beginning, every day of creation brought newness. And although the sun may go down on us after having a miserable day at work, we can be assured that the creative God has something new up his sleeves on the next day. No one day is the same because God is always creating something new. Although tomorrow isn’t promised, the promise of tomorrow is that it will be new. A new start for you. Frederick Buechner makes it plain when he writes: "Using the same old materials of earth, air, fire, and water, every twenty-four hours God creates something new out of them. If you think you're seeing the same show all over again seven times a week, you're crazy. Every morning you wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And the you that wakes up was never the same before and will never be the same again, either." This is why the scriptures tell us that God’s mercies are new every morning. We can rest in knowing that the pizzazz of God is present every day, whether we recognize it or not.

Remembering God and God’s ongoing presence and creative work in the world is not always easy in the barrage of daily life. Yet, in the beginning, when God creates, repeatedly, ‘God saw that it was good’ and “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” Some scholars even teach that the English word ‘good’ deflates the full meaning in Hebrew, which is more like ‘beautiful’ and overflowing with blessing, fabulous like a venerable piece of art. It can be hard to find the good, the beautiful, the blessing in life, when much of the media shares the bad or when you’re experiencing challenges in your life. But if we forget God, you can surely forget the good.

The reputation of the Church as a whole doesn't help either because in the seemingly perpetual conflicts among Christians, who can blame us for not perceiving good or the good God? The Netflix series, *Bloodline*, captures the struggles of the Church. In one episode, a priest asks a parishioner, "Do you know who God is?" The parishioner answers, "No sir." The priest responds, "A parent with insanely and violently destructive children." The perceptions of the Church are troubling and many are true, even making a St. Louis pastor declare recently, "Sometimes I wish I could save God from the church" (Starsky Wilson). This is why we have to go back to the beginning because "in the beginning, God." Turning back to God can be a spiritual recalibration of our souls and mission in the world. "In the beginning, God," not in the beginning, the Church. Not in the beginning, my profession. Not in the beginning, CNN or MSNBC. Not in the beginning, my rotary club. God is my all and all, not my small group or community service.

So, through it all, we have to keep asking where is the good and what is good because of God. In the beginning, at the beginning, in the Eden that is also our future, everything God made was "very good." God saw that it was good. This never changed. God never said the creation turned bad. It was good and it still is. The evaluation of "good" is never removed from creation even when sin enters the world. Sin negatively impacts human lives and the wages of sin is death but God doesn't take away his beloved name for us and all of creation—"good." All that God has made is good.

This is not the same as good food or good company or good music or good weather or good sleep or good jokes, that produces positive feelings, because goodness is not rooted in our feelings or circumstances; goodness is rooted in God. And people are always trying to figure out who God is and it isn't always necessarily straightforward as St. Peter discovers when he meets Forrest Gump at the Pearly Gates.

Forrest Gump dies and goes to heaven. The gates are closed but as Forrest approaches the gate, St. Peter says, "Forrest, it's certainly good to see you. We've heard a lot about you. I must inform you that the place is filling up fast, and we've been administering an entrance examination for everyone. The tests are fairly short, but you need to pass before you can get into heaven." Forrest responds, "Sure hope the test ain't too hard; life was a big enough test as it was." St. Peter tells him, "Yes, I know Forrest, but the test I have for you is only three questions. 1) What days of the week begin with the letter T? 2) How many seconds are there in a year? 3) What is God's first name?" Forrest left to ponder the questions over and he returns the next day and goes up to St. Peter to answer the exam questions. St. Peter says, "Now that you have had a chance to think the questions over, tell me your answers, Forrest." Forrest responds, "Well, the first one - how many days of the week begin with the letter 'T'? Shucks, that one's easy. That would be 'Today' and 'Tomorrow.'" St. Peter's eyes opened wide and he exclaims, "Forrest! That's not what I was thinking, but you do have a point though. I guess I didn't specify, so I give you credit for that answer. How about the next one?" "How many seconds in a year?" "Now that one's harder," says Forrest, "But I think and think about that and I guess the only answer can be twelve." St. Peter is astounded, "Twelve!? Twelve!? Forrest, how in heaven's name could you come up with twelve seconds in a year?" Forrest says, "Shucks, there's gotta be twelve: January second, February second, March second...." "Hold it," interrupts St. Peter. "I see where you're going with this. And I guess I see your point, though that wasn't quite what I had in mind, but I'll give you credit for that one, too." "Let's go on with the next and final question. Can you tell me God's first name?" Forrest replied, "Andy." "Wait a minute!" said a frustrated St. Peter, "I guess I can understand how you came up with your answers to my first two questions, but just how in the world did you come up with the name Andy as the first name of God?" "That was the easiest one of all," Forrest replied. "I learned it from a hymn, 'Andy walks

with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am his own...." God's name isn't Andy but we can call God "good."

What God does and who God is, is what goodness means. Creation is called good because it came from the *Bonus Dominus*, the good God. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Mr. Beaver says, "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly. 'Then he isn't safe?' said Lucy. 'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver. . . . 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you.'" When we experience goodness, we experience the intention and purpose of God for people to experience what is good in the world. "Every good and perfect gift is from above..." (James 1:17), from a good God. God would not grace us with the gift of the world if we weren't supposed to experience what is good. God saw that it was good.

There's a call and response statement that's used in some congregations. "God is good, all the time, and all the time, God is good." I used to critique this statement because how is God good when you find out another loved one has cancer or just had a heart attack? How is God good when another friend lands in ICU or another suicide bomber takes innocent lives? But I've changed my mind (it is possible!). I've changed my mind because goodness is always present since God is always present. What is good has to do with a good God. When God created, it was good. That hasn't changed. God's goodness doesn't change based on our situations or the latest breaking news. The good God's creation is still good and we should care for it. Before there was sin, there was blessing in the beginning, and despite sin, the blessing, the good, the beautiful continues.

Every day is a new creation of good. It may be hard to see that right now. It was good, but is it good, today, through your eyes? God saw that it was good. My hope is that you will eventually see it too and have the Psalmist's words as your testimony—"I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Psalm 27). It may not be right now but I will see. But know that it's not really about your sight, it's about God and even when you aren't looking for goodness, goodness will come looking for you, because "Surely goodness and mercy will follow (literally 'pursue') me all the days of my life...." (Psalm 23) God is so good that goodness is pursuing you! Good God!

My father was right when he penned these words around 1970:

*It's a beautiful day, I will rejoice and be glad in it,  
It's a beautiful day, I will rejoice and be glad in it,  
It's a beautiful day, I will rejoice and be glad in it  
for the Lord has made it good.*

Go back to the beginning because the beginning is always a good place to start. You know why? Because, "in the beginning, God." That says it all.