

## IS THIS A WONDERFUL WORLD?

Genesis 1: 1-5; 26-31; Phil. 4: 4-8.

A suitable text for Thanksgiving Day:

Genesis 1:31: “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good!”

The Hebrew word for ‘good’ has a rich variety of meanings, as it does in English: it can mean ‘pleasing.’ It can mean beautiful, bountiful, benevolent.

The author of Genesis depicts the Creator viewing the whole creation, and taking delight in it.

As a Jew, of course, when he speaks of “God” he’s not just speculating about some Supreme Being. He’s referring to the Lord of the Exodus, who inspired Moses, and led his people out of slavery in Egypt; he means the Holy, compassionate One who commanded his people to be just and righteous.

The author believes the world is good, because it is the good creation of this good God.

So, do we believe it? Is this really a good world?

It’s not obvious to everyone that creation is good, or even that the world is a creation at all.

The atheist will tell you that the world is a great stupid accident, a meaningless, mindless absurdity, fraught with trouble and misery. And this is an understandable opinion.

But on Thanksgiving day, Christians adopt an attitude of gratitude, in the conviction that the world is indeed the good creation of a good Creator.

Well that’s easy for us to say. On a beautiful warm autumn day, in a relatively safe and comfortable location, the world seems truly wonderful. If you’re well fed and healthy, prosperous and happy in your relationships – it may feel like a wonderful world.

In such circumstances it's easy to be thankful – and to celebrate Thanksgiving with loved ones, with a lovely turkey and pumpkin pie, and say, Ah, yes! Thank you God for a good creation!

There's a song by Bob Thiele and George Weiss, made famous by Louis Armstrong:

“I see trees of green, red roses too,  
I see them bloom for me and you,  
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world!

“I see skies of blue, and clouds of white,  
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night  
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world!”

But just now, what about the people of Barbuda, Antigua, Puerto Rico, Dominica, Florida, Texas, Louisiana. They might find such a song painful to hear.

“Hey, a hurricane hit my house and totally destroyed it! My child died in a flood! Don't tell me it's a wonderful world!”

Or, if you're lying in pain under a pile of concrete, in the dark, for days on end, after an earthquake in Mexico City, does it seem like a wonderful world?

If you're fleeing genocide in Myanmar, carrying your baby, hungry and frightened, or stranded for years in a crowded refugee camp in Lebanon, is this a wonderful world?

If your most beloved person has been shot down by a psychopath hiding in a hotel, is this still a wonderful world?

We need to be careful about Thanksgiving. Let's not be thankful that we're so well off, while others suffer. It could be us next time.

But the question whether we live in a good world is important. It's not just an abstract, academic question.

The conviction that we live in a good world, the creation of a good God, underlies a whole, practical attitude to life.

Thanksgiving is basically an affirmation that life is precious, that the world is beautiful. That's why we mourn and bemoan the loss of life.

Now, the affirmation that the world is a good creation is a statement of faith.

I mean, it is not a scientific fact, not a verifiable piece of information. No, it's a statement of faith, and the adoption of an attitude. As I said, the attitude of gratitude.

By faith, we choose to see the world in a certain way.

The alternative to this faith is a kind of cynicism. And there are lots of things to make us cynical and bitter – about God, about the world, and about people.

So, why should we be grateful? Is it a mere sentimentality, to believe that God is good, the world is good, and to live with gratitude?

To approach this question, let's look closely for a moment at Genesis 1. This is a great, epic Hebrew poem.

Ancient Jewish rabbis felt it was so profound and inspired, they placed it into the canon of holy scripture. The Christian church inherited this text from the Jews, and it has been part of our Christian canon of scripture from the beginning.

Now we'll miss the point if we take the details literally. This is not a statement of scientific or historical fact. The poet knew nothing, of course, of what we know now, about the evolutionary development of the planet or the universe.

He knew nothing of dinosaurs, nothing of modern astronomy or physics.

But that doesn't matter. A poem is not about facts.

A poem offers truth at another level. From a poet we hope to gain insight, wisdom.

A poem conveys, in artistic form, deeper thoughts, emotions, and values, and perhaps faith.

This great poem conveys the ancient Hebrew faith that the world is essentially good, the creation of a good Creator, the very one who brought them out of Egypt.

Now this poet was not naïve. He wrote just after the time of the exile to Babylon, sixth century, B.C. Possibly he himself had experienced the exile.

His people had been defeated and occupied by the Babylonians. Huge numbers had been brutally killed. His nation and its holy temple had been destroyed.

Perhaps he was among the survivors who had been taken off to a foreign country in chains of forced labour. Or maybe he was born in exile, and part of that Jewish community in Babylon, who maintained their faith in their God, even in a foreign land.

He knew better than we do the miseries and tragedies of life.

But here he is, striving to affirm the goodness and beauty of life.

He begins with a great declaration of faith: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

In other words, in spite of everything, this world is no big stupid accident. Beyond it, and within it, lives the divine Spirit.

This divine Spirit, whom we call God, is mindful and purposeful, majestic and mysterious, far beyond our comprehension, but nevertheless, the Source of all light and life.

The poet has opted to see the world in this way. He has opted for faith.

Now, the second verse of Genesis 1 is very interesting.

In vs. 2 the poet tells us that the earth was “a formless void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”

It has also been translated: “the earth was a chaos, disorderly and dark.”

How strange! We might ask, Why would God make a world that was chaotic, disorderly, and dark? Why couldn't God make a perfect world, from the beginning?

A world where hurricanes were impossible, where earthquakes didn't happen, where horrible diseases did not exist? Where psychopaths could never be born?

Well, I started asking these questions when I was about 12 years old. I asked my mother, "Mom, why didn't God make the world perfect?" She shrugged, and said, "Go ask your father."

When I asked my father, "Why didn't God make a perfect world?" He said: "Good question, kid. I've wondered about that myself." That's all I got from him.

So I asked my Sunday School teacher. She seemed rather disapproving that I would ask such a question. She said, "Well, the world is perfect, Harold, since God made it."

But I argued with her: "What about all the horrible things that happen?" She looked angry, and just said: "Harold, you'd better go and ask the minister about that."

When I asked the minister, he laughed a little, in a kindly way, and just said, "It's a deep mystery, Harold. We can never understand it."

So no one has ever given me an adequate answer. And I've never been able to give anyone else a good answer, either.

Many years later, as a theology student, I realized that the minister was right. We little creatures cannot possibly know what limitations, what possibilities may have been available to a Creator, creating a universe.

I can see why the minister laughed when I asked the question. It's almost a joke to think that we could ever know such a thing.

But verse 2 offers some insight when it says that the world, when first created, was chaotic, disorderly and dark.

In other words, it was needy, it was vulnerable. It was not eternal, as God is eternal; it was mortal, subject to decay, disintegration and death.

It had come from nothingness, and could possibly slip back into nothingness.

A scientist today might say, “Aha, the poet is talking about entropy.” Entropy!

The second law of thermodynamics says that all matter tends to decay, to break down, to disintegrate and to die and dissipate. All material beings are mortal.

The poet also doesn't know the answer to the question “Why?”

But then, the poet expresses his faith with a great eloquence: “The Spirit of God,” he said, “was brooding over the face of the waters.”

Speaking in metaphors, “the breath of God, the wind of God, swept upon this scene of chaos and darkness, and God said, “Let there be light, and there was light.”

It seems that, according to the poet of Genesis, God is the Source of light over darkness, and of life over death.

Or, to put it into scientific language, the divine Spirit is the Source of order and creativity over entropy.

As the poem moves on, from verse to verse, God proceeds to order the chaos. God separates the day from the night, the light from the darkness, the land from the sea.

Each day, from day one, to day six, the Creator brings into existence new things – animals, birds, fish, in an orderly fashion.

Culminating in the creation of the human being.

Human beings, male and female, he says, come last, and they are created in God's own image.

That is, we resemble the Creator, in that we too have the capacity to order the chaos. As intelligent, conscious beings, we are created as partners with God in overcoming the formless void and the darkness.

We are told to be fruitful and multiply, and to have dominion.

Now, having dominion surely doesn't mean gouging the planet, and mindless exploitation. It does mean cooperating, assisting the world to blossom and flourish.

We humans are given a task: to promote order, to defeat chaos. To serve the light rather than the darkness.

According to the poet, that's what God is about, and that's our purpose in life: It's what we are for.

Well, we may be created in God's image, but there's so much about this world that we little human beings could never have accomplished.

Since the 1920's, with the development of Hubble's telescope, the mathematicians, the physicists and the astronomers, have told us about an expanding universe.

They've calculated, and all seem to agree, that the realm of space and time exploded into existence about 14 billion years ago. It's called 'The Big Bang'.

In one way, it was a kind of chaos, as the poet says.

But within that unimaginable explosion, that dark and formless void, all the beauties and wonders of the planet earth were potentially there. The Big Bang was pregnant with all the laws of nature.

Our orderly world, the law of gravity, the laws of physics, chemistry and biology were all there.

We too were there, potentially, from the beginning. Our human intelligence and spiritual capacity were there, though it took millions of years for all of this to unfold.

And it's still not finished. God has created, "and is creating," as our creed says. As another poet put it, "The universe is unfolding as it should."

Now the laws of nature can be quite troublesome for us, to say the least. The realm of nature is quite indifferent to our well-being. Right? Hurricanes don't care which country, or which animals, or which people, they destroy.

It's true that we humans are now partly responsible for the hurricanes.

Yes, we have been very clever about manipulating the physical world for our benefit, but we've overdone it.

By our foolishness we could destroy the planet with a nuclear war.

Or, by our overuse of fossil fuels, causing climate change, we're in danger of destroying all life on the planet.

As we warm the planet through foolish uses of energy, we're warming the seas, which inevitably produce hurricanes.

And now, as a human race, we are too stubborn to do what has to be done to turn it around.

However, earthquakes are not our responsibility. They happen because of natural faults in the rock formations beneath us. They are indifferent to us. Bacteria and viruses also can wreak havoc with us, and they don't care who they attack.

The dreadful diseases, mental and physical, the nasty hardships of old age – these are not our fault. They're part of our natural mortality.

But do you see that, in a strange way, the inexorable operation of the laws of nature are also part of a wonderful world.

Without them, nothing would be possible for us. We could not live in a world without the laws of nature. We could predict nothing, we could accomplish nothing. We could plan nothing, build nothing.

Evidently, the Almighty Creator, Source of all power, does not micro-manage the weather, or the physical world generally.

I suppose it might be nice if a benevolent Almighty power did manage the weather.

Suppose that hurricanes only hit bad people; or that good people never experienced earthquakes. Imagine, if only bad people got sick. Wouldn't that be nice? Or would it?

Evidently, God allows the structures of creation a certain autonomy. God limits God's own power. The laws of nature take their course. Whether pertaining to our health or to the weather, they are indiscriminating.

And perhaps, in God's wisdom, they need to be.



But this does not mean that God is absent from the world of nature. No, with eyes of faith, we can see the work of the divine Spirit in the wonders of this world.

There are, of course, the plainly visible things – the beauty and immense diversity of plants, animals, forests; seas, lakes and fish, the colours of the rainbow, the glory of the sky. They evoke our praise and thanksgiving.

These in themselves are enough to convince many of us of an immensely intelligent Mind that lies behind our world.

But the discoveries of science bring this point home even more poignantly.

For example, studies of the cell, the tiny, microscopic building blocks of all living creatures, when examined through a microscope, reveal each microscopic cell as an intricately constructed organism, which in turn feeds upon intricately designed proteins.

If any of these were only slightly different, life could not exist.

Biochemists have explored the relation of bacteria to sunlight, and the amazing phenomenon of photosynthesis, which is basic to the supply of oxygen, without which nothing and no one could live.

All the components of the process have to be exactly as they are or we could not exist.

We observe also a presence of a remarkable internal intelligence in animals, birds and insects, which we call instincts. A remarkable internal intelligence permeates the natural world and the evolutionary process.

But we human beings are surely the most astonishing creatures.

If we reflect upon ourselves, our minds, and our spiritual capacities; if we consider our music, our art, our poetry and literature, our philosophy; but also our buildings, our machinery, our technologies.

Consider for a moment the stunning miracle of consciousness, our self-awareness. It is indeed difficult to imagine how all of this arose, in the absence of an immense, unimaginable Mind at the heart of the universe.

We human beings, surely, are the most wonderful thing in this wonderful world:

As Louis Armstrong sang:

“The colors of the rainbow so pretty in the sky  
Are also on the faces of people going by  
I see friends shaking hands, saying, “How do you do?”  
They’re really saying, “I love you.”

Yes, as we surely learned from Jesus, love – LOVE – is the most astounding thing in this wonderful world.

Our capacity to enjoy each other, but also to empathize, give ourselves for each other, even to sacrifice our lives for others.

In the face of the hurricanes, the earthquake, the mass shootings of recent days, we see the beauty of humanity, and the wonderful reality of love. People endangering themselves to look after others!

And if we personally think of the things for which we are most thankful, wouldn’t it be the people that we love, and who love us? Parents, children, grandchildren, grandparents, friends – and also the people we don’t know that we nevertheless care about.

Love – AGAPE – compassionate love, is surely the highest, the most splendid phenomenon ever to evolve in the universe!

It does not come from nowhere. With the eyes of faith, we see that not only Mind and Intelligence, but that Love – capital L Love - lives at the very heart of the universe.

And this is basic to our Christian gospel.

So when we speak of “God,” the “Creator,” it’s not just any Supreme Being that we might imagine or speculate about.

No, it’s the eternal One, revealed in Jesus; it’s the Creator who loves the world, and loves each of us, who reaches out to us through Jesus, and has a good destiny in store for us.

With all of this in mind, on Thanksgiving Day, as on every day, we can affirm our faith with heartfelt enthusiasm, for we do indeed live in a wonderful world.

Thanks be to God! Amen!

Solo: "What a Wonderful World"







