

Everyday Jesus: Jesus In Our Work

A sermon on selections from Genesis 1 and Genesis 2

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Last week we started a new sermon series called Everyday Jesus. This series is rooted in the resurrection, in the way Jesus' victory of sin and death informs and influences every single thing about the way we live as His followers. In this season of Eastertide, the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost, we are especially mindful of the way the presence of the Risen Christ in our midst infuses every moment with the hope of Christ's kingdom.

NT Wright put it this way: "Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven."

Last week, Amy preached about Jesus in our neighborhoods – about how being a follower of Jesus shapes the way we interact with our neighbors. This week our sermon topic is about work.

Preparing for this sermon has caused me to reflect on the first job I had as a teenager. So, just for fun and to get us thinking about the idea of work, take 30 seconds with the folks around you and briefly share what your first job was. If you haven't gotten your first job yet, you can share what your dream job might be. So turn to your neighbors, and I'll gather us back together in about 30 seconds.

Why do we have jobs? Sure, there's the money-making aspect of work. But aside from that, there must be other reasons why our lives are dominated by work. Right? As we shall see, the human orientation around work is rooted in the very beginning of human history. Today, we'll be looking at how the character of the Triune God as Creator provides the foundation for each of us to bear God's image in the world by doing our own work of creating and cultivating.

As we consider this, let's hear from God's Word together:

Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth."

²⁷ God created humanity in God's own image,
in the divine image God created them,^[a]
male and female God created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground."

Genesis 2:4-8, 15

On the day the LORD God made earth and sky— ⁵before any wild plants appeared on the earth, and before any field crops grew, because the LORD God hadn't yet sent rain on the earth and there was still no human being^[a] to farm the fertile land,⁶ though a stream rose from the earth and watered all of the fertile land— ⁷the LORD God formed the human^[a] from the topsoil of the fertile land^[a] and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life. ⁸The LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east and put there the human he had formed. ¹⁵The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

You may have noticed from our Scripture reading that the beginning of Genesis includes two creation accounts. Genesis 1 is described as a prologue, a grand, sweeping poem that uses broad strokes to depict a big, cosmic story. Genesis 2 is a nitty-gritty narrative. If we are thinking in cinematic terms, think of Genesis 1 using wide angle shots and soaring vistas, while Genesis 2 employs an ultratight shot of a hand digging in the dirt; in other words, Genesis 2 is a close up.

Let's first examine what's going on in the first account. In Genesis 1 we read the well-known statement about humanity made in the image of God. Following right on its heels is a three-fold explanation of humanity's purpose as God's image-bearers. This tripartite command is broken down like this:

- 1) Be fruitful and multiple
- 2) Fill the earth and cultivate it
- 3) Be stewards or care-takers of every living thing

The second of these three commands is the one that concerns us today. This statement – to fill the earth and cultivate it, is often referred to as the cultural mandate. The statement about humanity being made in the image of God and the mandate to fill the earth and cultivate it, are the foundation of the human vocation to work.

Think about that phrase, "fill the earth." Let's unpack that. In order to fill something, you need two things. First, you need the receptacle you're going to fill. And then you need the "stuff" that will fill the receptacle. Another way to think about it is like this: Next weekend I'm hosting a baby shower. As many of you know, an important part of a baby shower – or any party, really, is gift-giving. So next weekend before the baby shower, I'll get a gift bag out of our closet, stuff it with tissue paper, and then I'll place the amazing, wonderful, best baby shower gift ever into the bag. (say something about not naming the gift and nod at Karissa?) So, with this baby shower gift, there's the receptacle – the gift bag, and then there's the actual filling – the tissue paper and the present itself. This can help us understand what it means to fill the earth. The created world – what we call "nature" – is the receptacle that God has already made and has instructed us to fill. It's like the gift bag. The stuff that we create that adds onto the natural world is like the baby shower present. It's the "filling." And this is what we call culture.

It's easy to misunderstand what is meant by "culture." Sometimes people poke fun at "culture" as something that snooty people with white gloves and monocles participate in when they go to the theater or visit an art gallery. But I'm talking about culture in the broadest sense. Not high culture, or Western culture, or African American culture or sorority culture. What I mean by culture is the language, habits, customs, social organization, technical processes, values, and inherited artifacts that create shared meaning of the world. When we actively engage in our work places, homes, social gatherings, and schools, we are participating in the language, habits, customs, social organization, technical processes, values and artifacts that make up human culture. The activities that we do day in and day out are the means by which we fulfill God's command to fill the earth and cultivate it.

So we see that part of our most fundamental identity as human beings made in the image of God is to *work*: to create as God creates, to work as God works.

But the writers of Genesis don't stop there in fleshing out the call of humanity to fill and cultivate the earth with the work of culture-making. In Genesis 2 we read the instruction that the human was "to farm it or till the earth, and to care for it." As any farmer or gardener will tell you, tilling is one step in a process that leads to the growth of new things.

Riffing on the narrative we read in Genesis 2, Richard Mouw, the now-retired president at Fuller Theological Seminary, tells a story to illustrate the human vocation of work

On their first day in the garden, Adam and Eve claim a lovely corner as their domestic space. But after a few days, some of the leaves and fragrant buds begin to fall from the trees, covering the ground where they had slept. Adam kneels down in the dirt and begins brushing away the debris with his bare hands. Recognizing his good idea, but noting the inefficiency of Adam's work, Eve says, "No, no! Try this," and she breaks a large branch off a nearby tree and strips it of some of its smaller branches. She then uses it to brush the flower pedals and leaves away. "See," she says, "that was much easier." And then she names the tool: "Let's call it a rake." Adam pipes up and says, "Eve, I've got an idea: how about, every day after we take a nap we can take turns raking so that we can keep our space clean and clear. Since you did it today, I'll do it tomorrow." My! How household interactions seem to have changed since God created the world!

The point of this fun fable is to illustrate how Eve and Adam have begun to "fill the earth." Eve created a piece of *technology*: out of raw nature she fashioned a tool. Then she gave it a name — "rake" — articulating a rudimentary *labeling system*. Adam then outlined a pattern of social organization for *distributing labor* as well as setting up a *schedule* — "after naptime every day, we'll take turns." The first humans have added several things to the primary garden environment that the Creator designed. They are filling the gift bag for the baby shower with the tissue paper and presents. In doing this, they are living into God's command. From the beginning of human destiny, humans have been given the vocation of sharing in God's work — the work of filling the earth. The work that you and I do day in and day out allows us to lean into that calling.

So, here in Scripture, we see that work is good. To work is to participate in our identity as creators made in the image of the Creator God. You don't need to be a pastor at a church for your work to contribute meaningfully in Christ's kingdom. And work isn't necessarily something you get paid to do. Work that fills the earth with "stuff" that points to God the Creator, Christ the Redeemer and Holy Spirit the Sustainer can take many shapes and forms. Work that fulfills the cultural mandate can be seen in an entrepreneur who donates a portion of a start-up's profit to a homeless shelter. It can be seen in a corporate business whose personnel policies ensure that employees are treated fairly and generously and valued as people. It can be seen in a stay at home parent whose work is oriented around caring for children in a way that points to Jesus. Work that fulfills the cultural mandate can be seen in a classroom in which students act with integrity toward each other and toward their assignments. It can be heard in the moving refrain of musicians playing their best for the glory of God. Work that fulfills the cultural mandate can be seen in an artist whose artwork reflects the truth and beauty of God.

How are you leaning into your call to fill the earth and cultivate it? How are you, in your job, or at home, or at school, or on the sports field, working in a way that fills the earth with the goodness, beauty, justice, truth and mercy of Christ?

Whether it's a project at school, a business proposal, a creative design you've crafted with a team, or a special moment parenting your child, don't we feel satisfied by a job well done? Our work accomplishes flourishing. And we are designed to flourish. The Westminster Catechism states that the chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. It seems that part of our enjoyment of the Creator is joyful obedience to the vocation He has given us. As Richard Mouw has said, our true "enjoyment" of God includes our participation in the creative life God intends for us. In other words, part of the way we enjoy God is through living into our vocation to work.

But there is a final aspect of work to consider. We have looked at how our vocation as workers is rooted in the past, in the very beginning of human history. But it is not only the past that compels us to work; it is also the future.

We know that the Bible tells the grand story of how God is working to restore the world as a home where humans can once again dwell in unity with Him. We also know that this grand story begins with a garden and ends in the book of Revelation with a city — the New Jerusalem.

Now the crazy thing is that many of the products and artifacts of culture — the fruit of human labor — actually end up in God's Holy City, or New Jerusalem as Revelation describes it. Isaiah 60 — which is a prophetic picture of this new creation — depicts God's Holy City teeming with cultural goods. Domesticated animals, ships, precious minerals and jewels, and timber all appear in the city to beautify the place of God's sanctuary. And Revelation, similarly, describes the New Jerusalem as a center of commercial activity. Not only will this city be a multiethnic metropolis inhabited by people from every tribe, nation and tongue, but the physical space of new creation will be furnished with the products of human work and labor. For example, Revelation describes the city surrounded by majestic walls built of jasper, and the city itself built of pure gold. The walls of the city are adorned by finest gems that would have been refined by the practiced hand of a jeweler. Additionally, the wealth of the nations is brought in on the arms of the kings of the earth. This vision of the holy city from both Revelation and Isaiah shows us that the products of human work can be very good and even eternal. Our work is not just wasted labor. Rather, the work you do today, tomorrow, and next week participates in the filling of new creation.

Not all human work will find a lasting place in God's new creation. Weapons will have no place in this new creation in which there is no war or death. Swords are beaten into plowshares. Spears become pruning hooks. The myriad dark and even evil products of human culture will finally be lifeless and forgotten. And yet, interestingly, other aspects of what is described as pagan culture do appear in the biblical picture of new creation. A prime example is Isaiah's multiple references to the ships of Tarshish. For the Israelites in the ancient world, mentioning the ships of Tarshish was like cue'ing the theme music for Jack Sparrow and the Black Pearl. The ships of Tarshish were sort of like pirate ships in that they were designed to be symbols of power and strength and intimidation. In Isaiah 2 they are described as proud and haughty. They represent opposition to Israel's God. In Psalm 48, it is said that God will shatter the ships of Tarshish because they represent self-exaltation and pride. The cedars of Lebanon are described similarly as representing haughty pridefulness. Yet in Isaiah 60, Lebanon's trees are incorporated into the holy city to beautify God's own dwelling. And the ships of Tarshish come sailing in, and it's clear that have indeed been brought low by God, stripped of their haughty, rebellious purposes and transformed for a beautiful and holy purpose: to bear the children of Israel into the Holy City.

Indeed, the whole arc of Scripture points to a God who is at work throughout history to transform what is broken and restore all creation to the goodness for which it was designed. This even includes our work. Even the broken aspects of our work can be redeemed by God for a holy purpose in His new creation.

So, to recap where we've just been, we see the arc of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation moving from the garden to the city – New Jerusalem. And we see in Isaiah and Revelation many of the cultural creations of human history incorporated by God into His Holy City. We even read in Scripture that some aspects of human work that seem broken or unredeemable can be restored by God for use in His restored creation.

I'll leave you with this closing thought: Today, we find ourselves somewhere in between the beginning and the end, somewhere between the garden and the city. Our work as God's image bearers is an important part of the movement of redemption that begins in the garden and wends its way through the wilderness, into exile, to the manger, and beyond the cross of Calvary. In your work – whatever sort of work it may be – you are invited to embrace God's command to create and cultivate alongside Him. Your work in itself is one way that you can glorify God and enjoy God forever. In the words of hymn writer Isaac Watts, "O God, may Your house be my eternal abode, and all my work be praise."