

July 2, 2017: Building the Web

Isaac Toney

Scripture: Genesis 1:20-28, Psalm 139:13-18

I am so excited and intimidated to be back in front of you all. This place has been a spiritual stronghold for me throughout my journey, and it's wonderful to be back in this space, at this church. It is familiar, and it is home.

Thinking about what I'd like to speak about today, I had to fight through an abundance of memories from growing up at First Pres. The kind of feel good memories that leave you day dreaming with all your work before you, untouched.

Memories like pizzas in The Pit and ultimate frisbee on Herty field when "friendly" competition made sweating an inevitability. Mission trips to Atlanta, Washington DC, and Jacksonville, Florida, all of which sparked a lasting compassion for individuals struggling with homelessness. I remember joining the Youth Choir without any idea how to read music or sing, and I sang my really high Soprano voice right up until it switched on me. I remember sitting on the back row trying not to get in trouble for talking to my brothers, awaiting the day where I could move up to the Youth pews in the front. In all this nostalgia I even thought it'd be a fun idea to find a manuscript or a video of one of the homilies I delivered on Youth Sunday six or seven years ago. Luckily, they're all gone.

This space and this congregation were fundamental to my relationship with God. You all set me in a community of Godly interaction. Through picnics and worship services, this church melded together lots of little memories and experiences into one, lasting connection.

I don't know about you all, but that absolutely amazes me. How did those collection of experiences come together to land me behind this pulpit, today? What does it mean that our lives are now woven together by this common space?

I'm particularly amazed because none of those fond memories I mentioned earlier meant much to me when I graduated high school traveled to

Kentucky and enroll at Centre College. Like any other high school graduate I was cocky... and ready to take on the world by *my* rules. This church was not the cathedral in my head that its come to be but was, instead, too ordered, too straightforward... Too rulesy. So, for a time, I drifted away from those fond memories and connections.

This is a common experience, particularly for teenagers who pick up everything and take a step toward a new way of life. For as common as it is, I feel like I'm told everyday that drifting is an early sign of my generation's rejection of religion all together. That's a big leap to make for a whole number of reasons.

For starters the Psalmist reminds us that no matter how far we drift from religion, we never drift away from God.

There is a permanence to our relationship with God that cannot be eliminated. God's presence was there from the beginning and it was God *who formed my inward parts, who knit me together in my mother's womb.* This imagery of a knowledgeable, feminine God knitting me together from the bare minimum of my existence makes the 'drifting' from the church seem a bit trivial; and I've found comfort in this passage along my journey. Drifting may complicate the relationship, but our connection to God is far more intimate and established than we are willing to give it credit for.

The Psalmist is worried about something far more pressing than teenagers drifting from the church during college. The Psalmist fears for his life because his "enemies" surround him and death closes in. He is well aware of the might and glory of God and in a personal plea to God he cries out for God to DO something. He so beautifully reminds God of God's own knowledge of the Psalmist from the womb....as a hidden frame in the depths of the earth...to his unformed substance.... to the vast weight of all God's thoughts so that he can point his finger at God and say "See, you know everything! So help me!" He's cashing in his faith to save his life because he feels that God is present but not doing what God is supposed to do.

I think most of us can sympathize with Psalmist on this point. We admire God's strength, we witness to God's compassion, we marvel at God's

creation but we are jolted when something seems out of place. When God is so powerful but death seems imminent.

When God is so compassionate but our voice feels ignored and rejected.

When God's world is marvelous yet natural disasters bring destruction and pain. When we go to church every Sunday but still feel like we're drifting, slowly, from God.

For me, this is the most difficult part of life to swallow and the motivation for a little drifting: the tension between, on one hand, God's omniscience, and, on the other hand, the pain of living. It's tough. I came face to face with this pain in the last year during my internship at the Helm's Facility, a state prison for terminally ill male inmates and pregnant women. I was not allowed to enter the female wing of the prison, so I spent my Wednesdays this past year with ten men at Helms' Facility.

The more permanent residents spent their time in transit between the prison and the hospital to receive chemo treatments, coming back to prison to rest in a cell disguised as a hospital room. Other men stayed only for a few weeks while they prepared, and then recovered, from life saving surgeries. Mostly we just talked, and there are any number of stories to tell from those conversations. But it was the pain in that place that clouded my mind. The men were dying in the confines of their rooms and everyone knew it. As my relationship with the men grew, and I watched some of them fade away week to week, I began to feel like the Psalmist, ready to cash in my faith for God to DO something. God possesses all that power and knowledge, and *this* is what the world looks like?

We read the passage from Genesis earlier because the book of Genesis is a rich resource to explain why the world IS this way. As a book of memories, Genesis unites epic Ancient Near Eastern tales with Israelite truths to paint a picture, well, multiple pictures, of why our world is the way it is, pain and all. It is a look back on what is most valuable to the authors of the Bible and our passage is from the first story overall, framing all that follows with the world it describes.

Our passage picks up on the morning of the fifth day of creation. God has already separated the light from the dark, separated the waters of the earth from the waters of the sky, and gathered the dry land together in the midst

of the waters. God has established an ordered space, a realm of stability equipped with all parts necessary for creation to survive.

This ordered space bursts to life as God calls on the earth to bring forth vegetation, endowing the vegetation with a unique gift of seeds so that they may spread and create on their own.

And once God separates the great lights of the day and the night, God turns to the living creatures. Swarms of fish in the sea and birds in the air.... herds of cattle across the land...all the creeping things one can imagine...every wild animal that inhabits the earth and God declares all of them to be GOOD.

Then God comes to us. You and I. The author of Genesis puts the words right into God's mouth: *Let US make humankind in OUR image, according to OUR likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.*

Humankind, male and female, created by God with a few other divine beings hanging around too. This first creation account in Genesis acknowledges the existence of other divine entities in relationship with God. Be they angels or a divine council of gods, an image common in the religious accounts of the Ancient Near East, the text is sure to remind us that these are lesser beings. When it comes to the act of creation God is the sole player, no help required. So why does God even speak with these lesser divine beings if they won't in the act of creation?...

God chose to include them for their presence. God established a relationship with them and included them in the creation of you and I. For the ancient readers this was likely a show of power, a move that elevated the God of the Bible above the gods of surrounding nations. For us today, it can be a model of interaction moving forward. The value of including others goes well beyond their ability to alter the result. It is the connection, the relationship, that must be upheld.

God gives us dominion over the rest of creation to form a permanent relationship, a connection between us and the land and the animals and the sea.

And if we want a blueprint for how that “dominion” should play out then we only need to look back to how God interacted with creation from the beginning. God created this universe, a space of order and sustainability, ripe for creative movement. Then, God empowered other, lesser created beings to utilize that space.

God “let” the earth bring forth vegetation and the earth used its own God-given talents to bring forth an awe inspiring array of vegetation, uniquely adapted the various climates in God’s ordered world.

And God gave the fish the sea and the birds the sky but those created animals used their own God-given talents to populate the sea and the sky. They were fruitful and multiplied, and God says that is Good.

The same with the cattle and creeping animals of the earth; THEY must use their talents to populate the dry land. All of creation, from the beginning, was given talents by God then set out in the world to make connections with one another and continue to create. God’s presence never leaves them, but they are the ones that must drive creation forward in God’s ordered space.

God commands humankind in the same way, be fruitful and multiply. Create! We are empowered to drive creation forward and given the immense responsibility of allowing the rest of creation to grow too. That is what God says is “good”; It is “good” that God’s creation interacts through an established, permanent relationship

This creation tale in Genesis reminds us that God built a world sustained by interaction. That God’s presence is reflected in every connection we make because those are the highways to love and compassion that God built.

Even in a place so painful as the terminal ward of a prison, connections must be made.

I spoke with the Chaplain at the Helms' facility about how I could help the men, and how I could confront my own struggle with the realities of pain in the world. This Chaplain is a particularly wonderful woman who has worked in prison ministry for decades, and I wanted to know how she approaches each day. She said, "I remind myself that I am not bringing God into the room. God is there. God has been there and will always be there. It is my job to recognize what God is already doing and respond."

And she's right. Those men in prison are not alone. God is there with them; but God made a world that relies on connections and interactions too. This world depends on our willingness to recognize our talents, to recognize God's movement, and to act. This world flourishes when we act.

God's presence is built into the very framework of this world. The Psalmist knows this, knows that God knew of him before he was even formed, and this frustrates him. It seems like God can DO more if God is always there.

But in this first creation account in Genesis God works to empower US to DO more! God distributes power and influence so that the very things God creates can interact with God and one another to genuinely live. God even includes other divine beings in the whole scheme to further connect the results of creation.

So, I'm amazed to be here at this pulpit today because I cannot fathom the amount of tiny connections and interactions you all were willing to make for me. When I left this place five years ago I never imagined being here, now, with all of you. But you were willing to establish this community and put in the effort to connect with me so that when I heard God's call, this was the place I turned too. And that faithful connection is what God wants. God made a world that flourishes when we make the connection, to seek out God's actions and offer a new path for God to work through.

God is here in this place, now. Be ready to make the connection.

To God be the glory.

Amen.