

YOU ARE HERE ON PURPOSE

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 10, 2016

Based on Genesis 1 and Acts 17:26-28

One of the most popular courses at Kent State is a science course called “Seven Ideas that Shook the Universe.” The course examines revolutionary scientific ideas that fundamentally reshaped how people understand and think about the universe. My daughter Rachel took the course last semester. I found the concept intriguing; and it occurred to me that if we can identify breakthrough scientific ideas that have shaped our view of the universe, then we can certainly also identify revolutionary, transformative Biblical ideas-- theological ideas that have reshaped how people think about and approach life. So along that line we begin today a sermon series entitled, “Ten Truths that Change Life.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The first, foundational truth of the Bible explodes forth in the opening words of Genesis: in the beginning God created; and Genesis continues with a grand, poetic account which declares that the whole universe is the intentional, purposeful creation of God, and we as human beings are the pinnacle of God’s design, as we have been created in God’s image.

You might think that ancient peoples generally would have thought something like this—but not exactly. In the ancient near east, people had a variety of creation myths, stories that they told to account for the existence of the universe and human beings. The myths had a lot of different details but a similar basic outlook. They envisioned the world as resulting from a chaotic battle between the gods—a giant conflict between cosmic powers, out of which the world emerged as a kind of unintended consequence. In the ancient Babylonian myth, for example, the earth is the body of a god who was slain in the conflict. Human beings were a further afterthought, and were not considered to be in any sort of noble relationship to God. In the Babylonian myth, for example, the chief god finally created humans to be slaves to the gods, so that lesser gods could be relieved of their duties.

If you get past the mythological language, you can notice the close similarity between the basic outlook of these ancient myths and the way that many secular and atheistic people think about the universe today. When people say that the universe is just the unintended result of a chaotic clash of cosmic forces, and that human beings have no special place in the universe, they are voicing the same basic ideas as ancient Babylonians, just dressed up in modern language.

What the Bible proclaims is radically different; its message was revolutionary in the ancient world, and continues to be transformative today. The Bible declares that the universe was intentionally created by God, according to a good design and a grand purpose, with human beings created in a special place. On the one hand, human beings are one with the rest of creation—they are created, says Genesis, out of the dust of the

earth [*God formed human beings out of the dust of the ground. Genesis 2:7*—but they are also created “in the image of God.” [*God created humankind in His image; in the image of God He created them. Genesis 1:27*] This declares an enormously important truth about who you are.

If the ancient and modern myths are true, then you are nobody special. You are here by accident, just a random blob of protoplasm that is soon to be extinguished; the best you can do is to try to manipulate the world around you in order to survive as long as possible, and nothing you do has any real meaning. But the truth proclaimed in the opening words of the Bible changes everything. The idea that you are “in the image of God” proclaims that while you are a physical being, you have a spiritual nature, a kinship with God. This Biblical picture of our human nature makes sense out of what we observe—we see that we are made, as the Bible says, out of material stuff, and so have a commonality with the rest of creation; and at the same time we observe that we have a vast array of unique, higher qualities: spiritual qualities that are all encapsulated in the statement that you are “in the image of God.”

Like God, you can create. Animals can build things—birds and squirrels build nests which always look the same—but human beings are unique in that, like God, we can create new things. Moreover, we not only create functional things, we create art. We create purely for the sake of beauty. This makes no sense at all if human beings are simply material entities that are the chance result of mechanical forces, as many people want to insist today. If we are just physical beings that arose out of chaos, out of a dog eat dog struggle for survival, we should have no interest in beauty for its own sake. Yet we marvel at flowers and snowflakes and sunsets, and we make paintings and music. This does make sense when we take hold of the Biblical picture of creation. In the Biblical account, we are in the image of God, who creates a marvelous world, full of wonder, and when God beholds it “God sees that it is good.” [Genesis 1:10,12,18,21,25,31] So we reflect the nature of God when we appreciate beauty and when we create beauty.

Furthermore, like God, you are a moral agent. You understand good and evil, you can freely choose to do the good, and you can express authentic love, including the sort radical self-giving love for unrelated other people such as we see in Jesus. In all this human beings go way beyond what we see in the animal world. There is, as the Bible says, something very special, something higher about us; or as the Psalmist says, “Lord, You have made us little less than God.” (Psalm 8:5)

As a part of our special nature, you also have the capacity to comprehend—you can understand the world, raise questions and explore, and reflect about meaning and purpose. No other creatures on the planet sit around in discussion groups, or establish universities, or write books, or ponder the meaning of life. The more we think about it, the more it is clear that the picture in Genesis has it right—we are part of creation and at

the same time we have a profound array of spiritual qualities that give us a likeness, a deep connection with God.

Of all those qualities, the highest and most special is our religious sense—we have an awareness of God, we can come into a relationship with God and worship God. Scientists have observed that human beings seem to be hard wired for God; virtually all ancient peoples everywhere were religious, and modern attempts to stamp out religion, such as in the Soviet Union or communist China, were complete failures. People in China today are more religious than they were when the Communists took over in 1949. As Paul said in the book of Acts, “In God we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) In the practice of religion, people have sometimes struggled to rightly *conceive* of God - so there have been distorted ideas of God from ancient Babylon to radical Islamists today—but what has been universal among human beings through the ages is the sense of transcendence, the awareness that there is an ultimate reality beyond us, and that we will find our fulfillment when we come into authentic connection with God. As St. Augustine put it, “You have created us for Yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You.”

Here then is the number one truth—you have been created by God in the image of God. It is a truth not only proclaimed at the beginning of the Bible, but it is a truth that receives its ultimate confirmation in the coming of Jesus Christ. In Jesus—God become human—we have a powerful declaration of the fundamental kinship and intended close connection between human beings and God: how we are created as children of God who are meant to be in fellowship with God forever.

Today, of course, people are often encouraged to forget or deny this truth, which results in many people struggling and missing the mark in life. But when you accept the truth that you are created by God in the image of God, it changes life—in several key ways.

First of all, it makes clear that you are a person of infinite value. You are not just a very temporary creature that has randomly appeared in the universe. You are here because God made you, and you are of great worth in God’s eyes.

This also means that you have a purpose in life—a God-given destiny to grow in a relationship with God and to live as a child of God. Many people today struggle to find any sort of meaning in existence. But life has tremendous meaning when we understand ourselves to be a part of the eternal design of God.

The conviction that we are created by God in the image of God also has enormous impact on how we live in the world. If God is creator of the universe, this means that the natural world is something to be treasured by us, and if we are in the image of God, this means we need to take responsibility for the care of the world, which is exactly what God tells people to do in one key part of the Biblical creation story. So we are moved to be good stewards of the planet.

Finally, the truth of who we are—that we are each in the image of God --- will profoundly shape how we treat one another.

On the Greek island of Samos, there is a monastery on the top of a hill occupied by fifteen nuns. They sustain themselves by selling embroidery and painted icons to visitors. But in recent months the monastery has been overrun by refugees, who have fled to the island and then climbed up to the monastery to seek help. When tourists arrive at the monastery, and find the place beset with a crowd of refugees, with piles of luggage and trash all around, they often take one look and leave. This is not good for the embroidery business. But Sister Evniki, the monastery's mother superior, says that the nuns have no plans to change what they are doing, which is—they offer hospitality to the refugees. They give them fresh water and food, and allow them to rest. Why? Sister Evniki says, "We believe that in each person we see the face of Jesus Christ. We must help them."

When we genuinely take hold of the truth that we are each created by God in the image of God, then we treat other people—all other people—as persons of infinite worth, and we reach out to them with compassion and care.

Of all the truths that the Bible proclaims, the first one is the truth about why you are here. Many people will tell you that you are just here by accident, and so your life finally adds up to nothing. But the Bible declares that you are here on purpose. You are a special creation of God, designed to grow in deep fellowship with God, and share in God's purposes for the whole world. When we take hold of that truth, we have the foundation for a life that makes sense, a life that has meaning, a life in which finally we can live as children of God.