

Genesis portrays the Garden of Eden as a place of communion. God's gift to humanity is the space to be itself, to be free in relation to one another and in relation with God.

Of all the creation myths we know, to say that God is the *good* creator of a *good* creation is unique to Genesis. The good is ultimately identical with the very essence of God, who is the original source, the eternal present and ultimate end of all that exists.

In the Babylonian narrative of creation, the gods are fickle, engrossed in conflicts and resentments, indifferent or hostile to humankind. The insistence of Genesis on the goodness of God and of creation is not a trivial statement.

From the beginning, good is intrinsic to the whole of Creation. God's sevenfold declaration *it was good* unifies the manifold forms of creation: God said, *Let there be light* and God saw the light, that is was *good*. God called the dry land *Earth* and saw that it was *good*.

And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed and God saw that it was *good*. And God made two great lights and set them in the firmament, and God saw that it was *good*. And God created every living creature which the waters brought forth abundantly, and God saw that it was *good*. And God created everything that crept upon the earth, and God saw that it was *good*.

God created humankind in his own image, and God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was *very good*. The divine actor in Creation has implanted a sacredness in existence. In our day, the very conception of the sacred has vanished like the atmosphere of a lifeless planet.

We have no evidence that there is anything like earth, any other bearer of life. Minus life, this planet is a grain of sand, a tiny captive of gravity, one of two trillion planets in the observable universe. We create life and we destroy it, but we don't know what it is. If it is the essence of everything, a breath of the very Spirit of God, life is good, sacred, and calls for our reverence and delight in it.

This world is suited to human enjoyment in anticipation of human pleasure: *out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to sight* (Gen 2:9). This is an extremely elegant detail. The beauty of the trees is noted before the fact that they yield food. It is a rich goodness that the Lord intended and created for our experience.

God, as the creator of beauty, intends for us to behold and enjoy it, and God gives us the gift of apprehension this pleasure requires. C. S. Lewis called Psalm 19 the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world. Day after day the pageantry we see in the sky shows the splendor of the creator.

The heavens declare the glory of God,

and the firmament proclaims the work of his hands.
Day to day conveys the message,
and night to night imparts the knowledge. (Psalm 19:1f)

Why are we here on earth? Human beings are created on the sixth day, so their first full day alive is the seventh, the Sabbath on which God rested. We are not created to work first, to earn our rest. We are created first to behold the beauty of creation, to see the glory of God, to contemplate the miracle of life.

Adam and Eve are placed in the garden to “work and keep” it. This may sound like gardening, but an ancient Hebrew would immediately recognize the language as priestly. The Levites are told to “work and keep” the tabernacle (Num 3:7-8). The early rabbis believed the first humans were intended to be priests of creation, tending God’s cosmic temple.

In the Hebrew mind there is no division between secular and sacred. Human life and human flourishing are a form of worship. All life is spiritual: work, bearing children, hobbies, friendship, cleaning gutters, commuting.

This is our worship—the offering of the ordinary acts of our lives to God. A modern paraphrase of Romans 12:1 has: *Take your everyday, ordinary life . . . and place it before God as an offering.*

It is significant that the Bible does not begin by merely affirming God’s existence but with his act of creation, which is the conferring of existence. Life, all that is, seen and unseen, is conferred upon us, is gift, is grace beyond measure. We hold this life as a sacred trust to be enjoyed, “to work and to keep” as priests of God’s cosmic temple.

(This sermon is informed by the work of Marilynne Robinson and David Bentley Hart.)