

Simple, Life-Giving Way
A Sermon on Genesis 1:1-5 by the Rev. Philip Major
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At our house, we've been watching a television series called *Good Omens*. *Good Omens* is based on a novel co-written by two British authors, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. The two main characters are angels: one, more or less good angel, named Aziraphale, and a second, more or less bad angel, named Crowley. In the show, we watch various real and imagined episodes in the history of humanity through the eyes of Aziraphale and Crowley. *Good Omens* is constantly bringing deeper theological questions to the surface. For instance, is it acceptable to question God's judgments? Every time we watch an episode, my wife swears she will find a way to use *Good Omens* as a jumping-off point for a series of serious theological discussions with a youth group or a new members class or some other sort of church discussion group.

In one episode, Aziraphale and Crowley are standing in the back of the crowd, watching one of the terrible events in human history: the crucifixion of Jesus. Aziraphale, referring to Jesus, asks Crowley, "Did you ever meet him?" Crowley replies, "Yes. Seemed a very bright, young man." Referring to the crucifixion of Jesus, Crowley asks, "What was it he said that got everyone so upset?" In a typically understated fashion, Aziraphale replies, "Be ... kind to each other."

Yes, that pretty much sums it up. Jesus asked us to be kind to each other. If I were to try to explain the entire New Testament to someone with no prior experience, I would say Jesus gave us a simple, powerful commandment: "Love one another." That's the core teaching of the New Testament. Love one another. When we hold this one practice in the center of our lives, everything is much, much better.

It's more difficult to choose a single teaching as the central idea of the Hebrew Scriptures. Our version of the Hebrew Scriptures, often called *The Old Testament*, is a more wide-ranging collection of books than the New Testament. There are many more books in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. In the version I use there are 46 books in the Old Testament, compared with 27 books in the New Testament. Unlike the books of the New Testament, which were written during a span of 70 years, the Hebrew Scriptures were written over a period of at least 700 years.

But if I was asked to choose a single, core teaching from the Old Testament, I would choose an idea from today's selection from the book of Genesis. God created the world, and God saw that it was very good.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

God created the day and the night. The story continues from there. God created the sky, the oceans, and the dry land. God created plants, and the sun, and the more distant stars. God created birds, and creatures that live in the water, and creatures that live on the dry land. God created humankind in God's image. Let's notice that in this story God created both women and men at the same time. On the seventh day, after the work was finished, God rested. So, in a certain way, God also created the idea of rest and sabbath time.

The most important verse comes near the end: "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good." The created world is very good. The entire created world is God's creation. This is the idea at the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures. Everything else flows from this idea.

A few of the ancient Greek philosophers had a different idea. The Greek philosophers and the people who were influenced by them said the world is divided into two distinct parts: the physical part and the part that is not physical. Some said that the physical world, including our human bodies, are not important, or bad, or weak, or even evil. According to this dualistic worldview, the parts of life that are not physical are the good, important parts.

This idea that the physical world is bad or less important is more or less the complete opposite of what we find in the first chapter of the book of Genesis. The story of creation gives us a different message. The created world is God's creation. The physical world is very good. Christ Jesus affirmed this message of the Hebrew Scriptures. By being born, by taking on flesh and dwelling among us, Christ Jesus sanctified our daily, human, physical life.

This idea is at the heart of the Hebrew scriptures. The entire world is God's creation. Creation is to be treated as a blessing. The created world is holy, being made by God. When we hold this idea in the center of our lives, everything is much better.

Speaking of the physical world, we decided it wouldn't be a good idea to have people travel to St. Paul's to be physically present for worship today because it is very cold in our building right now. Our furnace is broken. Mark, our technical engineer, is wearing a winter coat and hat. Jim is running a heat lamp to keep his bare fingers from freezing at the keyboard. Renee, Tom, and I are wearing heavy sweaters and earmuffs and long underwear, because it is very cold in our building today.

The farmers would remind us that the cold and the snow are essential for many crops. The apple trees and pear trees must have many cold days each winter in order to bear fruit. A cold, snowy winter is part of God's creation in Central New York; what God has created is good.

Since you cannot be physically present, I decided to preach this sermon right in front of the altar; I wanted you to see the flowers on the altar. The flowers were arranged and given in loving memory of Andrew Bessemer, by Tim Cassavaw, his husband and partner of 53 years. Andrew died a year ago. Andrew Bessemer loved plants. When Andrew was just a boy, he grew many plants. At the age of 11 Andrew announced to his family that he was starting his own business, growing and selling geraniums. Andrew and his father built a greenhouse. Andrew grew hundreds of geraniums each year and sold them to people, making his deliveries on his bicycle. That was back in the 1960s on Long Island.

Andrew is one of the saints in my life. Andrew held some vital ideas in the center of his life. God's creation is very good. The plants and flowers are God's creation. Our job is to help them out a little bit, to be helpers in God's garden.

The plants are God's creation and they are very good. Water is God's creation, and water is very good. After many years of research, scientists discovered something that surprised many people: water is the very best thing for us to drink! In some churches they keep a special basin of holy water for people to use to remember their baptism. The water is considered to be holy because a priest has said a special prayer over the water. I might suggest that the water is holy because it was created by God.

According to Genesis, God also created this thing called rest. God rested on the seventh day of creation. God made resting and sleeping holy parts of life. It turns out that getting a good night's sleep is also extremely good for you. I read an article in the newspaper that reported startling findings: if we were able to replicate the health effects of eight hours of solid sleep in the form of a pill, it would be considered to be a miracle drug. Sleep is very good for us. We shouldn't be surprised, because sleep is also part of God's creation.

Life can seem complicated and difficult at times. God's way is not complicated. God's way is simple. Be kind to each other. Treat God's creation as if it were holy, because it is holy, being made by God. Hold these ideas in the center of your life, and life will be much better.