Sermon 1: Sarah Seibert

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**Text**: Colossians 1:19-23

**Title**: God Made Dirt...and God Saves It

(Part 3 of a four part sermon series on Creation Care)

*Preached at Hillyer Memorial Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Raleigh, NC on July 25, 2021*

**Call to Worship**

O sing to the Lord a new song;

 sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, bless his name;

 tell of his salvation from day to day. [Psalm 96]

**Invocation**

O God, who has filled the world with beauty: Open our eyes to behold your gracious hand in all your works; that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may learn to serve you with gladness; for the sake of him through whom all things were made, you Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. *The Book of Common Prayer* p.813

**Scripture Text:** Colossians 1:19-23

**19** For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, **20**

and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,

whether on earth or in heaven,

by making peace through the blood of his cross.

**21** And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,

**22** he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death,

so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— **23** provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith,

without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

*This is the Word of God for us the people of God. Thanks be to God.*

The Bible is a complicated book to categorize. It’s written by many different human authors over multiple millennia; it’s a mix of poetry and prose with various different genres and subgenres. It’s even hard to tell if it’s one book or 66. And yet, when we carry it with us to church on a Sunday morning or pick it up from the pew in front of us, it’s always bound in a single volume. Despite the incredible variation between its covers, Christians throughout history have affirmed that the Bible tells a single Story. Attempts to distill that Story are always incomplete--poetry detests summary--but sometimes the bird’s eye view helps us locate ourselves on the map, even if it requires going back and filling in some details later.

Various YouTube videos of undetermined quality claim to tell the whole story of the Bible in just 17 minutes, 8 minutes or even 5 minutes. Despite its shortcomings, one of my favorite ways to tell the story of the whole Bible uses just three words: Creation. Fall. Redemption. Creation, Fall, Redemption.

In the beginning, God *created* a breathtaking world. And it was very good.

But human beings chose to reach beyond the limits God had set for us and instead of soaring to new heights, *fell* and broke their intimate relationship with God. Every bit of God’s good creation was touched by this rupture and longs to be made whole again.

Creation. Fall.

These first two parts of the Bible’s single story are told in the first three chapters of Genesis. The next 1,186 chapters of the Bible are devoted to Part 3: Redemption. God’s relentless determination to restore that broken relationship.

But who, exactly, is God restoring this relationship with? Our children will sing you an answer that starts with these three words: Jesus loves me! Jesus has come to restore *my* relationship with God. As we get older, perhaps we begin to sing *Jesus loves us* as we learn that God loves not just me but my family, my friends, people on the other side of the globe and even that kid who sits behind me kicking my chair.

When I was growing up, I participated in a Bible memorizing program for kids on Sunday nights. We’d take our book home each week to learn some Bible verses and recite them on Sunday nights. Each successfully recited verse earned points that could be redeemed on “store nights.” Something must have been lost in translation, however, because I don’t think I realized there was a connection between the memorizing and the prizes until almost the end of the year!

But I got the better end of the bargain because the verses I learned that year have stayed with me longer than any of the toys I earned. In particular, I remember learning John 3:16 which quickly became my favorite Bible verse. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* God is in the business of redeeming the world.

I grew up reciting John 3:16 and, in college, I spent a whole semester studying the Gospel of John chapter by chapter, but it wasn’t until this spring that I noticed something peculiar about this verse.

It doesn’t say “For God so loved *humanity*” that God sent God’s only Son. That’s true, of course--God loved us so much that God sent Jesus. But that’s not **all** it says. John 3:16 says “For God so loved *the world*.”

I hope that you hear this and say, “Wow. That is incredible!! Our God is amazing!”

But there’s a part of me that hears it and remembers the time not long after my younger sister was born when I got myself stuck in a situation that only an adult could get me out of and the babysitter would not put down my sleeping sister for fear of waking her up. In that moment, sharing love with my new sister felt like losing love to me. The more who were included in the love, the less each one got.

Thankfully, God isn’t like my babysitter and God’s love and care is not a limited resource. Moving from Jesus loves me... to Jesus loves us... to God so loved the world doesn’t deplete God’s love but reveals how big God’s love really is. God’s love is so vast and long and deep and wide that God can love the scallop and the nuthatch with lavish affection even as we confidently proclaim: Jesus loves me this I know.

Colossians, too, takes a wide view of Jesus’ saving work.

Not only has Jesus created **all** things, human and non-human, and not only does Jesus sustain **all** things (vv.16-17), but, through Jesus, God reconciles “to himself *all* things”--in heaven and on earth, creatures who swim and soar as well as those who skip and walk. Just as humanity’s fateful decision impacted every corner of the world, so Jesus’ work on the cross brings all of creation back into right relationship with God.

ALL receive the promise of hope the Gospel proclaims because... the Gospel “has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.”

Did you catch that?! It’s right there in verse 23: The Gospel has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven! God’s redemptive work through Jesus touches every creature God has made.

As strange as it sounds, creation longs for the hope this Good News brings just as much as you and I long for it.

Humans were not the only ones impacted by Adam and Eve’s disobedience. The consequences trickled all the way down and the very ground (*adamah*) which had worked with God to create humanity was now cursed.

In Romans, Paul says that creation is in bondage and decaying. Its suffering is so great that “the whole creation is *groaning*.” (Ro 8:18ff) From this place of suffering and bondage creation is eagerly awaiting its liberation.

But I imagine we don’t actually need to be told that creation is groaning because many of us have witnessed for ourselves the suffering of creation.

My family moved to Massachusetts when I was in high school. Leaving all my friends and having to make new ones in the middle of high school was rough, but one of the better parts of the move was that I was now old enough and we now lived close enough to our little town center that I could go many places on my own, even before I could drive. My favorite place to walk was next to the winding Ipswich River and the stone bridges it ran under. It exemplified New England charm.

But the Ipswich River is groaning. It provides recreation and drinking water for my family in Ipswich and people in over a dozen nearby towns. After two droughts in the past five years, it’s now one of the 10 most endangered rivers in America.[[1]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftn1) While I was visiting my family in June, we got a letter from the Ipswich Water Department imposing water restrictions. It’s something we see most summers, but it had never arrived so early in the summer. The river is groaning and, as parts of it go dry, the fish and the animals that make their home in and along the river are groaning too.

North Carolina knows the groaning of creation all too well. Since I moved to North Carolina less than 5 years ago, I have lived through 2 of the 6 most destructive hurricanes in North Carolina’s history, dating back almost 70 years. 29 people died in Hurricane Matthew (2016), which caused around 10 billion dollars worth of damage. Hurricane Florence (2018) had wind gusts up to 106mph and caused 25 billion dollars in damage, much of that concentrated in Wilmington.[[2]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftn2) I had a chance to meet the pastor of the Christian Church in Wilmington several months ago and he shared that their church building had been so damaged by Hurricane Florence that, between the pandemic and the hurricane, the congregation was out of their sanctuary for 22 out of 31 months.[[3]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftn3) Almost two years! All creation groans.

There have been times in my life when I have been so exhausted and so worn down that the hope of the Gospel and the grace of God seem to be about the only thing that’s keeping me going. If, as it seems, creation too knows this kind of deep and pervasive brokenness, how much does it too need the Good News of the Gospel and the reconciliation Christ?

In the midst of brokenness, bondage and groaning, Christ makes peace through the blood of his cross. This peace is whole and complete, peace that passes all understanding. But it does not come without cost.

For God **so loved** the world that he **gave** his **only Son**…

The beautiful dance of the Trinity is interrupted, the only, beloved Son is pulled away from Father...in order to make this peace.

Peace was the aim, but it was accomplished through pain…

after tears of blood are shed alone in the garden,

After the Savior of the world is stripped, mocked and beaten and

the blood of the Prince of Peace drips off the cross and falls to the earth.

The women gathered at the foot of the cross see it and weep.

Somehow, creation knew it too, and for three hours day became night, as if the sun couldn’t bear to shine on such a painful scene.

Peace through the bloodof the cross.

Reconciliation through death.

As if Paul anticipated some resistance to a Gospel described in such a way, Paul declares: I, Paul, became a servant of *this* gospel.

 Not a servant of a gospel proclaimed only to humanity.

 Not a servant of a gospel that is free from cost and sacrifice.

No, Paul became a servant of *this* gospel and he faced his own suffering because of it.

It is so startling a declaration: I, Paul, became a servant of *this* gospel, that I had to ask myself, have *I* become a servant of *this* gospel?

Do I serve a gospel whose scope is bigger than just *homo sapiens*, encompassing “every creature under heaven”?

Am I a servant of a Gospel where true peace comes only with sacrifice?

If I am, I wonder what it costs me. If we are, I wonder what it will cost us as a congregation.

Fast and easy are the buzzwords of our culture. But serving *this* Gospel costs something.

For my parents, it has meant watering their brand new landscaping by hand either before 6am or after 7pm as they follow the water restrictions to protect the Ipswich River.

For our church it might be continuing to use real plates and silverware when we eat together to minimize how much we have to throw into the belly of a groaning creation, even though we know it means someone will be standing in the humid spray of the dishwasher after we’re finished.

And I’m afraid to say that, to truly offer the Gospel peace to a groaning creation, these sacrifices are just scratching the surface. I wonder what it might look like if we became servants of this costly Gospel outside the walls of our church and began resisting the culture of quick and easy that so often further pains our groaning world. There would likely be some blood, sweat and tears involved. But I think there might also be an outpouring of hope and a welling up of peace.

And here is the Gospel promise for all those who become servants of *this* Gospel: where true sacrifice is offered, God creates abundance.[[4]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftn4) Where true sacrifice is offered, God creates abundance.

 Do you remember the child who shared his lunch and fed 5,000?

 The widow who gave her son’s last meal to a stranger and fed her household through the rest of the famine?

 The gift of the Only Son that brought life to the **world**?

This is such wonderful, joyful news that I’m going to invite you to do something that we usually only do in December. *Joy to the World* is such a wonderful Christmas carol, but it’s so much more than that. I invite you as we sing to pay close attention to the words. Listen to how all creation rejoices in God’s salvation.

**Joy to the World**

1 Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

Let earth receive her King;

let ev’ry heart prepare him room

and heav’n and nature sing,

and heav’n and nature sing,

and heav’n, and heav’n and nature sing.

2 Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!

Let men their songs employ,

while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,

repeat the sounding joy,

repeat the sounding joy,

repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

3 No more let sins and sorrows grow

nor thorns infest the ground;

he comes to make his blessings flow

far as the curse is found,

far as the curse is found,

far as, far as the curse is found.

4 He rules the world with truth and grace

and makes the nations prove

the glories of his righteousness

and wonders of his love,

and wonders of his love,

and wonders, wonders of his love.[[5]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftn5)

Source: Christian Worship: Hymnal #353

[[1]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftnref1) [http://thelocalne.ws/2021/04/13/ipswich-river-named-as-one-of-10-most-threatened-in- america/](http://thelocalne.ws/2021/04/13/ipswich-river-named-as-one-of-10-most-threatened-in-america/). See also ipswichriver.org/river-conditions/

[[2]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftnref2) <https://abc11.com/hurricane-hazel-florence-nc-diana/6997516/>

[[3]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftnref3) Brad McDowell FB Message 7/12/21 “We were out of the sanctuary from Sept 2018 until June 2019. Then back in for just 9 months until we went virtual March 2020, and came back in March 2021. So we had a period where we were out of sanctuary for 22 out of 31 months.”

[[4]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftnref4) Ellen Davis, “Healing for Sin Sick Heart” sermon in the *Luminous Word* collection.

[[5]](https://word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?WOPISrc=https://wopi.dropbox.com/wopi/files/4rGn3h9MmbAAAAAAAAAA7w&dl=0&rlkey=nvzxr3i1toozcf82b2uam30fl&ui=en-us#_ftnref5) Accessed from <https://hymnary.org/text/joy_to_the_world_the_lord_is_come> 3/29/22.