

“Making Disciples”

Isaiah 55:12, Matthew 28:16-20, Genesis 1-2:3 & Revelation 21:1-4

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June 11, 2017

I have always appreciated and been inspired by trees. So many different shapes and sizes. Trees change form and color with the seasons. Most trees endure intense storms, drought, and come back from fire. Trees repopulate, nurture, and replenish the earth. You can climb on trees, swing from trees, play in trees, and find shelter in trees. Trees hang from the sides of cliffs and split huge rocks apart. Trees provide homes for critters, reduce erosion, and are essential to our buildings and furniture. Trees provide warmth through fire and with the help of a blacksmith forge tools. Trees are beautiful. I enjoy the unique personality of each tree. When the wind blows through the leaves I see and hear them dancing with God’s joy, cheering me on throughout life. The prophet proclaims. **Isaiah 55:12 NLT “You will live in joy and peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands!”**

For 41 years, I have been fascinated by pictures and documentaries about huge trees. Seven years ago, I was able to see them in person at the Grove of the Patriarchs in Mount Rainer National Park. A short hike through a forest leads to a foot suspension bridge across the Ohanapecosh River. The singing water is crystal clear. The river splits creating an island, a magic kingdom, where douglas fir, western hemlocks, and red cedars have never been logged or touched by fire. One of the regal giants is 50 feet in circumference. Some are over 1,000 years old, towering over 300 feet. At first, I was awe struck by their massive size and magnificence. Then my thoughts turned to science, all the processes that are happening to grow and shelter a multitude of animals. Their ability to draw nutrient rich water up hundreds of feet and to absorb water from the clouds. It started to rain hard. I laid down on the comfy needles and looked up. It took the rain over an hour to reach the ground through the tree. I thought of all the world events and marvels of creation, my friend, the tree, can share with me. A wave of joy enveloped me. All my senses were super sensitive. The harmony of the wind in the trees with the rain. Seeing the enormous size and the minute beauty. The smell of ion charged rain. The feel of the soft needles, textured yet pliable bark and the humid wind. The nutrient abundant air had a delicious indescribable taste. My soul resonated with a cosmic joy. A gift was given to me, time vanished, to-do lists vanished. I felt like I was floating. Every fiber of my being realized, I belong to God, I am loved by God. A multitude of scriptures coursed through my synapses all expounding an aspect of joy. I saw collages of joyful times. Delightful smells transported back to joyful moments. Suddenly I realized, God is joy. God desires for me to be joyful and to share God’s joy with you. Since then I sign most of my emails with joy and end most worship services with, “Go in joy.”

I have had other a-ha moments with God that I have shared with you in other sermons. My first experience of God’s love for me through my parents, Sunday school, confirmation, and youth fellowship. The cleansing of God’s grace at the Deep Freeze Retreat that guided me into serving as a pastor to share grace. The energizing love shared with Leslie, and God’s renewing of our love. A wave of peace that emerged as a cloud blew over me on the Appalachian Trail that deepened my trust. The majesty of dancing with the unforced rhythms of grace revealed to me through the stars.

Jesus said, **Matthew 28:16-20 NLT “Then the eleven disciples left for Galilee, going to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw Jesus, they worshiped him—but some of them doubted! Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”**

Making disciples begins with yourself. Opening yourself to receive the love, joy, grace, and peace of God. Paying attention to what God is doing in your life. Partnering with God where you sense God already revitalizing. It is extremely challenging to teach another about an aspect of God that you have not already experienced. A disciple knows Christ and shows, Christ is learning and teaching, following and leading. On

earth, we are always growing as a disciple. The moment one thinks they know God's will on everything is the moment they are incapable of discipling another. For discipleship is a mutual journey of growing, learning, loving, rejoicing, and worshiping. Making disciples begins by continually striving to make yourself a disciple.

Discipleship is mysterious, because it transcends our ability to understand and communicate. Beliefs and doctrines are fingers pointing to God. The danger is that we tend to focus on the fingers; and in so doing, miss God to which they point. We must not hold too tightly to our beliefs and doctrines; otherwise, they become more important to us than the Divine mysteries they were created to reveal.

We grow as a disciple by enjoying the goodness of creation, which includes all people. All has been created good. It can be fun to explore, research, and debate the "how" of creation. Scripture emphasizes the "who" of creation. God creates all good. God is so pleased with creation that God moved into creation to live with us.

Genesis is not intended to be the history of creation. Genesis is not intended to be the science of the how of creation. Genesis is a story intended to reveal God in loving relationship with us and all of creation. Genesis is a story intended to reveal that God creates with a purpose and order. Genesis reveals that all is created good. Genesis is a story that is less about cosmic inflation and more about cosmic elation, the joy of a creating God. Sadly, many have missed God's joy because they are focused on the "how" of creation and miss God's goodness for all.

John Walton suggests that science and scripture observe the same universe through two different but equally valid lenses—like the difference between viewing Van Gogh's painting "Starry Night" and looking at a picture of deep space from the Hubble Space Telescope. They are both true in the sense that they describe an actual thing: the night sky. Van Gogh, however, wasn't trying to describe it scientifically; that's a function of the telescope. Van Gogh instead painted an artistic rendering of the reality he saw. It's a picture made to tell a story in ways beyond systematic description—it makes you feel something. The Hubble photo can do that as well, of course, but it is intended for a particular scientific purpose.

As Genesis is read listen for the feelings of God for you. Every time we hear the word "good" let us all respond. **"It was good!"** **Genesis 1:1-2:3 NLT** **"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. "It was good" Then God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day" and the darkness "night." And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day. Then God said, "Let there be a space between the waters, to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth." And that is what happened. God made this space to separate the waters of the earth from the waters of the heavens. God called the space "sky." And evening passed and morning came, marking the second day. Then God said, "Let the waters beneath the sky flow together into one place, so dry ground may appear." And that is what happened. God called the dry ground "land" and the waters "seas." And God saw that it was good. "It was good" Then God said, "Let the land sprout with vegetation—every sort of seed-bearing plant, and trees that grow seed-bearing fruit. These seeds will then produce the kinds of plants and trees from which they came." And that is what happened. The land produced vegetation—all sorts of seed-bearing plants, and trees with seed-bearing fruit. Their seeds produced plants and trees of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. "It was good" And evening passed and morning came, marking the third day. Then God said, "Let lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. Let them be signs to mark the seasons, days, and years. Let these lights in the sky shine down on the earth." And that is what happened. God made two great lights—the larger one to govern the day, and the smaller one to govern the night. God also made the stars. God set these lights in the sky to light the earth, to govern the day and night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. "It was good" And evening passed and morning came, marking the fourth day. Then God said, "Let the waters swarm with fish and other life. Let the skies be filled with birds of every kind." So, God created great sea creatures and every living thing that scurries and swarms in the water, and every sort of bird—each producing offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. "It was good" Then God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply. Let the fish fill the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth." And evening passed and morning came, marking the fifth day. Then God said, "Let the earth produce every sort of animal, each producing offspring of the same kind—**

livestock, small animals that scurry along the ground, and wild animals.” And that is what happened. God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to produce offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. **“It was good”** Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will be stewards for the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.” So, God created human beings in God’s own image. In the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them. Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Care for the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.” Then God said, “Look! I have given you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. And I have given every green plant as food for all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the small animals that scurry along the ground—everything that has life.” And that is what happened. Then God looked over all God had made, and God saw that it was very good! **“It was good”** And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day. So, the creation of the heavens and the earth and everything in them was completed. On the seventh day God had finished God’s work of creation, so God rested from all God’s work. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because it was the day when God rested from all God’s work of creation.

Timothy Merrill writes, “This description of the seventh day is actually the key to understanding all of Genesis and, indeed, the whole biblical narrative. The ancient people who read this text would have instantly understood what it was: a temple-building story. In the ancient world, people believed that gods only “rested” in temples – indeed temples were constructed for this purpose. And temples were not merely residences for the gods, they were also the places from which the gods controlled the cosmos. When a god is at rest, it means that there is security and stability within an ordered system, because that god is in control. This is not rest in the sense of relaxation, but rest in the sense of engagement, care, and order. God sets things in their proper order and function. Creation was now prepared and ready as a temple in which God would dwell with God’s people. The seventh day, in other words, is an “Emmanuel” moment -- it’s the moment when God moves into creation -- the moment God comes to dwell with us! God lives with us to share blessings, love, joy, peace. The first six days are really about God building a house. The seventh day, it becomes a home. God delights in creation enough to want to move in and be present. God is elated! God is pleased with the results and finds the creative outcome so good that God “rests,” or moves in, settles down, as it were, and takes up residence in creation, among us. This is the point of the creation story: God at rest, dwelling with God’s people in whom God delights.”

God loves us so much that we have free will. Our poor choices have created a mess of God’s good creation. Jesus came to clean up our mess. At the end of the Bible, the main point is the same as the beginning, God delights in dwelling with us. **Revelation 21:1-4 NLT** “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among God’s people! God will live with them, and they will be God’s people. God will be with them. God will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

When the woman at the well asked whether the temple in Jerusalem or Samaria was the divinely authorized place to worship God, Jesus rejected the human claims of both centers. God’s temple is all of creation. God’s temple is each of us. We make disciples by magnifying the glory of God by being our true good self. Like the woman at the well, it is easy to get overwhelmed by the volume of religious words humanity churns out making it a challenge to be still and know God, to sense God’s loving delight in us, around us and throughout all of creation. Religious leaders usually gets distracted in thinking their ways of approaching God are best. Jesus sharpest words were for the religious leaders who believed they fully knew God and knew God’s will for other people. Jesus encouraged the woman at the well to worship in spirit and truth. God’s spiritual presence and reality transcends all boundaries even time and space. Truth is an experience of God that fills you with a goodness. Memorable places may be special to us, but they never privilege or delimit access to God’s presence in one place or another. Likewise, our ways of doing worship may have special meaning for our communities, but the divine presence is never restricted to a particular form or practice. Worship is glimpsing a truth of God and responding in gratitude. When we contemplate and share the truth of what God has done, we

grow in gratitude for God's grace and goodness making ourselves a disciple and enabling us to disciple others. When we are grateful to God personally, this attitude becomes a way of being. We thus become people who are grateful to others, then our lives become a blessing as we express that gratitude. In terms of God's truth, we thank God for what God has done, and we praise God for who God is. We make disciples by observing God's active, joyful, loving, gracious, peaceful presence in our lives and the lives of others. As one continually makes a disciple of one's self, by sharing their experiences, they make disciples of others by encouraging them to enjoy God's goodness.

It might be an experience of God's joy under a tree. Or an experience of God's love through a song sung in Hebrew that compares God's love for you to the love of two passionate lovers. Or an experience of God's restoration on a workcamp trip. Or an experience of God's living water through a conversation by a well. Or an experience of God's healing as you sense God's compassion tending to your tears. Or an awareness that God's grace is healing you. Or an awareness that God's peace is enabling you to become fully alive. Or an awareness that you have eternal life with God, who delights in you. God is constantly permeating your life with good experiences. There are unique experiences for every season of your life and for every person. Making disciples is nurturing your experiences of God, sharing them and encouraging others to discover their own, unique experiences of God. Amen