

Cosmic Renewal

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Date: 22 December 2019

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[0 : 0 0] ever go back. So to all of you friends and family who traveled to be here with us, we are so thankful to God for you and we are so happy that you're here. Just a couple of days left before we celebrate Christmas. As Kevin said already, this is the final Sunday of the Advent season and Advent is a time of preparation. It's a time when we contemplate why Christmas is such good news, why it's not just a time for food and drink and celebration and sentimental sort of Hallmark movies. All that stuff is good, but there's a deep hope here and a true hope here for the world and that's what we're here to think about. We've been thinking about the brokenness of the world and why isn't the world the way it should be? And the way Christians would answer that question, why is the world not as it should be? We would answer this question by talking about a kind of relational breakdown. That at the heart of our understanding of the brokenness of the world, there is a brokenness in our relationship with God. And then if you can imagine concentric circles out from that, because our relationship with God is broken, we then have a broken relationship with ourselves.

We don't fully understand why we do what we do. We don't have access to all of ourselves. And then as a result of that, our relationship with one another is broken in all kinds of ways. And over the last few weeks, we've talked about each of these kinds of brokenness.

And then finally, our relationship with the world is broken. And when we talk about our relationship with the world, another word for that is our work. What we do in the world, what we make of the world, even that is broken. And so this week, this final Sunday, we're going to talk about why Christmas is good news for our relationship with the world. How Jesus can bring renewal to our relationship with God, self, other. And then this week, how Jesus renews our relationship with the world. And so we're going to look primarily at Genesis chapter 2, but we're going to take a number of other scriptures into account. And we're essentially going to look at three things about our relationship with the world, our work. We're going to look at the way it ought to be. We're going to look at the way that it is. And then we're going to look at how it can be because Jesus came at Christmas.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your work. We thank you that you came. We thank you that the eternal became enfleshed, that the unknowable, unsearchable vastness became vulnerable. And we thank you that because of that, because of your life, because of your work, because of your finished work on the cross, we get to gather here in an unshakable hope, knowing that the future is secure. I pray that you would speak to us this morning through your word. I pray that you would tell us what we need to hear. I pray this by the power of your spirit in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen. So our relationship with the world, how ought that relationship, what should it look like? The creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 was not written down to tell us much about how things were made in terms of how long it took or the mechanisms or order by which things were made. We know from looking at other ancient Near Eastern literature and understanding this genre that the focus of Genesis 1 and 2 is not about how, it's about why. It's about helping us understand what all of this is for. How's it meant to work? And it does that very well.

In Genesis 2, the passage that Ellen read a little while ago, shows us the relationship that we as human beings ought to have with the world. And in short, it goes like this. God made the world to provide for us.

[4 : 11] And then God made us to provide for the world. It's a reciprocal relationship. It's a symbiotic relationship. And so we see in chapter 2, verse 9, out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. This shows us the earth is meant to provide all our needs. And we likewise are meant to provide for the needs of the world. Verse 15 says, the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work and keep it. This is our original job description. And if we compare Genesis 2 with Genesis 1, verse 28, where we see God instructing human beings to fill the earth and to rule over it, and then we understand the nature of that filling and the ruling is actually working and keeping, we begin to see why God put human beings in his world.

We are here to work it and keep it. And I actually think a better translation of those words is cultivate and protect. We are here to cultivate and we're here to protect. So our job is to take the wilderness and to turn it into a garden. Our job is to take this unfinished world and to bring out the best of what it has to offer and then to protect it, to protect it from harm, to make sure it survives from generation to generation. And so what does that actually mean today? Because most of us are not gardeners. Some of you are, and I think that's really cool. I've tried it and failed miserably.

So what does this mean today? Well, it means any way in which we take the raw material of creation and we make something out of it. In other words, the best way to think about human vocation, and I'm talking all human vocation, all human vocation, the best way to think about what you do in the world is that you are making something out of the world. You are a kind of, maybe not an agricultural gardener, you're a cultural gardener. You're a cultural gardener. And you are making culture, you're making cultural goods. We cultivate creation by creating new ideas and by starting businesses and by building cities and by developing new technologies. This is how we create and cultivate in God's world. So some of us here create art. Some of us create music or some of us work in fashion maybe or some of us write literature. Some of us create experiences through hospitality or cleaning or design. Some of us cultivate children through parenting or teaching or coaching or mentoring.

Some of us manage teams. And, you know, management is cultivation. You are drawing the best out of your people. You're maximizing what they have to offer. Some of us serve in politics. Some of us develop strategies. Some of us write software. Some of us work in healthcare, right? We could go on and on and on.

And all of these are forms of cultivation. We're creating culture. And when you're doing that kind of work, you're doing what God put human beings here to do. So every single human being is here to make something out of the world, to be productive. And what's interesting is we even see this on a neurological level, right? Your brain has what's called a pleasure center in it. And its job is to produce dopamine that makes you feel good. And the reason that pleasure center is there and the thing that activates it is meaningful work, right? When you make meaningful progress toward a goal, your brain releases a hit of dopamine. That dopamine makes you feel good. And then you think, you know, that felt good. I want to do more of that. And so your brain rewards meaningful, productive behavior. And what's interesting is once you attain that goal, that pleasure center shuts down.

[8 : 36] Its primary purpose is to motivate you to pursue the goal. And another way of saying it is to say that we are, in general, happiest when we are meaningfully pursuing goals and making progress. That's when we're happiest. We're actually not as happy when we get the goal. We are happiest when we are pursuing it.

And when we see measurable progress, right? So, you know, I even see this in my two-year-old, Imeline. The other day I was trying to cook and she obviously wanted me to do other things. And so I said, Imeline, I would love for you to help me cook. I said, could you please go get the cutting board out of the drawer? And could you please get this bowl and hold it? And I started just kind of giving her orders. I was like, if you want to hang out, you're going to be my sous chef. And the greatest thing is, I mean, Imeline, she could barely lift the cutting board. But the entire time she's doing it, she's saying, I'm happy. I'm so happy. I'm happy. And she's trying to get it up on the thing. And she was beaming, right? And it's because she realized that she was meaningfully contributing to something that was happening in the house. And I think her brain was just filled with dopamine at that point. I think she was loving life, right? And so every single human being is made to be productive.

You know, kids need meaningful chores, even if it's hard to get them to do it. They thrive when they know they're contributing to your house. I think we need to rethink retirement for some people, right? I was talking to somebody this past week who, we said, what are you planning to do when you retire? And he said, well, I'm planning to do absolutely nothing. And absolutely, right? I'm not there yet. And probably for a while, doing nothing is going to be really great. But depending on how long this person lives, that's probably not going to be the answer, right? Because most people figure out after they're in retirement that they don't necessarily want to do nothing.

They just may want to redirect their energy and their efforts in another direction, right? Because human beings by nature, we need a purpose. We need a mission. We need a goal to pursue.

And this is why we should be very concerned to make sure everybody in society is able to meaningfully contribute to society. That everybody in the church is meaningfully contributing to the life of the church. Yes, we need volunteers. Yes, we need people to sign up for things like children's ministry. Yes, there's a need, but actually we have a need in us to be contributing.

[11 : 00] It's what we're designed to do. So we are here to be productive, to create and cultivate. We're also here to protect, to protect the world. Which is interesting. The world by design is not only an incomplete place when God finishes creating it, but it's also a vulnerable place. And it needs to be protected. It needs to be cared for. It needs to be preserved. That's our job as human beings.

So this means that however we may disagree on a policy level, hopefully we understand that caring for and protecting the environment is not a political issue for Christians. It shouldn't be. This is just a natural part of our job description to want to make sure that our world is clean and that we're not doing undue damage to it and that there's something to pass on to the next generation of children. This is simply a part of human vocation. So this is how our relationship with the world ought to be.

It provides for us and then we provide for it by cultivating and protecting it. Now the question is what went wrong with all that? And something's gone very wrong. I don't have to tell you that.

One of the consequences of human sin, which means our choice to ignore God and the world that he made, one of the consequences of that is that our relationship with the world is broken. So instead of providing for us, nature can be a cruel and harsh place. Instead of us providing for the world, human beings can be pretty cruel and harsh. We've done enormous amounts of damage to it through various forms of environmental degradation. And so we see this brokenness in Genesis 3 where God says to Adam, cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. So no longer fruit but thorns and thistles. You know, literally the ground is cursed.

Crops fail. There are droughts and blights and food shortages and famines. We also have terrible earthquakes and hurricanes and floods. We also have disease and infertility and entropy and decay, right?

[13 : 22] All of these are evidences that show us that the world is broken, that our relationship is broken. And our work is now thwarted by thorns and thistles. Whatever you do, whatever field God has put you in, you are facing thorns and thistles. We run up against broken systems. We run against corrupt bureaucracies.

We run up against unjust institutions. We run up against inept managers. We run up against disgruntled, resentful employees, right? In all these ways, we live in a world where you can do your best, you can do everything right and still get the wrong outcome because the system is broken.

And so because of this, you know, work can be rewarding but can also be tremendously frustrating and exhausting because of the thorns and the thistles, the futility. And then without God at the center, if you look at this image again, without God at the center of things, everything starts to become distorted, including our work. We begin to lose perspective on the work that we do. And this moves in a couple of directions. So some people, because God is no longer the center, their work becomes the center. Their work becomes the ultimate thing in their life. It becomes the source of meaning, the source of identity. They can't imagine being in the world without the work that they do.

And so you see some people going in this direction and then they sacrifice all of the time and energy that they have for their work. And so their family gets neglected, their kids get neglected, their health gets neglected, their friendships get neglected, all in pursuit of the idol of work.

For other people, they go in the other direction and they begin to feel like without God at the center of things, their work seems meaningless. Everything seems meaningless. They wonder why they even show up, right? They wonder if they're making any difference at all. They run into that futility and they think none of this matters anyway, right? And this isn't just something that people in offices experience, right? This is something I think that a lot of new young parents experience, you know? You're sitting around kind of more or less isolated, feeding and changing diapers all day and just feeling like your entire life is this sort of routine. And you long to be able to use adult words and have adult conversations, right? And there can be a kind of sense of meaninglessness to it all. Other people just push paper around all day or answer somebody else's emails or help other people make more money. And you just wonder, why am I even doing this? It all feels meaningless. There's no joy in it. And then within that, there's a whole other set of issues that comes into play regarding meaningful productive activity.

[16 : 25] So remember the pleasure center I just told you about that's designed to reward you for meaningful progress by giving you a little hit of dopamine, right? Well, that system can be hijacked.

It can be hijacked, right? So every addictive drug there is, from nicotine and caffeine all the way to heroin and cocaine, every addictive drug there is operates by hijacking that pleasure center, right? It operates by giving you a hit of dopamine. It floods your system with dopamine and makes you feel great and makes you want more of it. That's why it's addictive. And so we have to understand that all of these substances are hijacking a system that is meant to reward meaningful progress.

But it's not just drugs. It's also things like food and drink and shopping and, you know, many of the activities that we do around the holidays. Also, trigger that pleasure center, right? Flood our system with dopamine. Make us feel good. And I'm not knocking all of that. I hope we all have great food. And I hope we all have great celebration this week. But we just need to be aware that this is part of why it's so enjoyable, right? And we need to think about the fact that it all sort of ties together, that it is actually our overconsumption that in some ways is contributing to environmental degradation, right?

So it's all kind of connected together. And then, you know, what else activates that pleasure center? Your smartphone. Which some of you knew this. Your smartphone, right? So you pull out your phone.

It says 86% of Americans report constantly checking their phone. I mean, 86% of Americans say that they check their phones constantly. So likes, retweets, texts, notifications, buzzes, dings, chimes, every single time, dopamine, dopamine, dopamine, dopamine, right? So you're flipping through Instagram, looking at pictures of other people's dogs. Dopamine, dopamine, dopamine, dopamine. And it's Pavlovian conditioning, right? It's a Pavlovian conditioning machine, right? Bell reward, bell reward, bell reward, right? You're being conditioned. And so here's the point. All of these things create the illusion of meaningful, purposeful behavior. In other words, they trick your brain into believing that you are doing something meaningful with your time and energy, but in reality, you're doing nothing. You're doing nothing. And so the point is, it's ridiculously easy. And this is, man, I am, this is coming right from my heart, from my own life. It is ridiculously easy to fill our time with food and drink and shopping and smartphones and fritter away decades of our lives.

[19:17] Christmas. And this is why, you feeling the Christmas spirit yet? This is why, this is why Christmas is such good news. Because Christmas gives us all an opportunity, a breather, to reorient, to reorient ourselves back to the one who came to put things right.

Right? And we have to understand that Jesus came into the world not just to renew our relationship with God, not just so that we could get saved and someday escape the world. He came because the promise is that one day he's going to renew the world. And the purpose of saving people is so that they can join in that effort of making all things new. That's what a Christian is. We become co-partners with God in the renewal of all things. In other words, we take back up that original mantle that was put on our shoulders. The original human vocation of creating and cultivating and protecting that which God has made. So, Jesus brings renewal to our work. And there are a few, let us say, Christmas gifts that Jesus offers us that change how we think about our work. I'll just give you a few here as we close.

Number one, to all of those in this room, all of us who are workaholics, to all of us who can't take a day off, to all of us who tend to make idols out of our work, Merry Christmas, Jesus gives us the Sabbath. In Mark chapter 2 verse 28, Jesus says, I am the Lord of the Sabbath. In other words, he's the one who can give Sabbath rest. He's the one to whom the Sabbath points. So, when Jesus cries out on the cross as he's dying, it is finished. He's not just talking about his death. What he's saying is that he's accomplished everything necessary to reconcile us to God and make us whole again. And so, every Sabbath is an opportunity. It's a God-given gift-wrapped present to you to cease from your work and to focus on God's work, to remember that no matter how important your job is, at the end of the day, nobody's work here on earth will save anyone or anything. The finished work on the cross will save everything. And that's the hope of the Christian, right? Your work is important, but it cannot save you. There's this article in The Atlantic recently that I think some of you saw that I loved.

It's about a local pastor here in D.C., African-American pastor, a pretty well-known guy who's planning to take his first sabbatical. And especially in the African-American church, sabbaticals are pretty controversial, and there's not a lot of support generally for people taking sabbaticals. And so, it's a bit of a countercultural move. And so, a lot of people are interested in this because they think it might set a trend among other pastors. And so, they interviewed him, and he says this.

He says, at one point, when I started, I was working seven days a week. And a member of the church at the time, an older lady, said, why do you work every day? And the pastor responded, well, the devil doesn't take a day off. And she said, why is the devil your role model? Can't you just imagine that?

[22 : 46] This older, wiser woman and this young, idealistic pastor, why is the devil your role model? She said, Jesus should be your role model. And he says, take a day off. I love that, right? So, to all of us workaholics, Merry Christmas. Jesus has given you the Sabbath. To all of us who feel like our work is meaningless, Jesus gives us an entirely new motivation. Colossians 3.23, whatever you do, work heartily. And you know that actually literally translates, work from the soul.

Whatever you do, work, pour your soul into it. As for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord, you will receive the inheritance as your reward. So, the entire motivation is different.

Most people work for some combination of money or influence or power or meaning. If your job gives you one or two of those things, you're probably doing pretty well, right? If you get power and influence and money and a sense of meaning and all, man, that's pretty rare, right? So, most people work for those reasons. And those aren't bad reasons to work. But Christians don't ultimately work to seek a reward. Our work is a response to the security that we feel because of our inheritance, which is what Paul is saying here. Now, what's the difference? What's the difference between seeking a reward and resting in an inheritance? Well, you can't earn an inheritance, right? It's not based on performance. The only way to get an inheritance is to be born into the right family.

The inheritance is something that you're given because of your family name. And so, becoming a Christian means taking the family name of Jesus Christ. It means taking the inheritance of Jesus Christ, which he freely and joyfully offers. Which means that everything that matters is already yours.

It's already yours. It's there. It's secure. It's waiting for you. It's yours. Your place in God's kingdom is secure. So, Jesus would say to anybody here who feels meaningless about what they do, he would say this, hey, good news. Merry Christmas. You work for me now. You work for me now.

[25 : 13] I don't care if you wait tables or change diapers or negotiate international business deals. You work for me. So, every single thing that you do, you're doing for an audience of exactly one.

And when you do that work that I have given you to do and you pour your soul into it, when you work from the soul, right, that glorifies me. It delights Jesus to see us doing what he has put us here to do.

It delights him. His value system is utterly different from ours. I couldn't get away from the wonderful illustration of Eric Little, which some of you know. Chariots of Fire. But as some of you know, Eric and Harold Abram are rivals throughout the entire movie. They're rivals all the way to the very end. They're both runners. They're both fantastically talented. And the entire story is about this rivalry between Eric Little and Harold Abram. And the medal race comes up. The thing that we've been building toward, but the medal race is going to happen on the Sabbath. And Eric refuses to race. And so, Harold ends up running and winning and he wins his medal, but the medal doesn't actually end up satisfying him. It's just a medal. It's just a... By contrast, Eric leaves. He goes on in his life to serve the people of China for years before being put in a Japanese prison camp where he eventually dies. And, you know, a lot of people in the world look at that and they look at this profoundly gifted runner like Eric Little and they say, what a waste. What a waste. Imagine if he had kept racing. Why would he go do something like that? But then if you understand Eric's motivation, you begin to understand that the reason he ran had nothing to do with the applause. It had nothing to do with the medals.

You know, it wasn't because of fame or money. When he was asked, he said he runs because when he runs, he feels God's smile. He feels God's smile. He feels God's pleasure. That's the source of meaning in our work. It's all we need. You know, you say, I'm not making a difference. I'm not having an impact.

When you do what God has put you here to do and you pour your heart into it, it delights God. He'll make the difference. Last gift to those of us who feel overwhelmed. With all of the problems of the world, Jesus gives us hope. Merry Christmas. One day, Jesus will bring about a new heavens and a new earth. You see in Mark chapter 4, Jesus has the power to rebuke the wind and the sea.

[28 : 03] He's the Lord of creation. There's nothing that happens outside of his sovereignty. There's nothing he can't redeem or renew. We see in Romans chapter 8, this great language, we are now in the birth pangs, right? Creation is groaning with expectation, but one day, all of this pain will give rise, will give birth to a new world. All of our present suffering is not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed. And if you're sitting here and you're thinking, all of this sounds great, but I really don't know what I'm supposed to do with my life. And people keep asking me, what are you going to do with your life? And I just have no idea. I think that's the wrong question. It's just too big. It's too vague. I don't have anybody who can sit down and think, here's what I want to do with my whole life. And you know, if you're one of these people who does have a plan, I would just suggest you hold it lightly. I have yet to meet a person who got their plan A.

You know, most of us are like in the, you know, the lower half of the alphabet. You know, most of us are starting over. It's like plan like double B, you know, plan, you know, we sort of lost count, you know. And that's good news because we never get our plan A. But whatever life you're living, that's God's plan A. That's God's plan A. And it's always going to be God's plan A for your life.

So we can trust him. And so if you trust God and trust that you're living his plan A, then you can just have the freedom to look around at your little corner of creation where God has placed you and to begin in trust and love and desire to serve him, begin to ask, what here needs to be cultivated? Is there anything here? You know, it was interesting. We threw a party the other night for some of our neighbors and we were terrified that nobody was going to come to our Christmas party because we don't know anybody. And a lot of people came, including these two neighbors who have been in this bitter feud for I don't know how long. And they had to stay 20 feet apart from each other to be in our house. But they were both at the party. And we didn't even know about this, right, until we had the party. And we just started wondering, well, maybe one of the things that we're called to cultivate here on this street is just relationships between the people who live here, many of whom we don't even really know each other. And so we look around and we ask, what, you know, what might need to be cultivated here? And then we ask, what needs to be protected here?

You know, are there kids that need my attention? You know, is there somebody who lives down the street that needs my focus, right? Is there something that needs to be cultivated, something that needs to be protected? Is there anything that I can do in my life to make the world a little cleaner, a little more sustainable? So this Christmas, I think my final word to you would be to take some time to think about all of these relationships, right? Your relationship with God, your relationship with yourself, your relationship with other people, and then your relationship in the world, your work, your calling, your vocation. Think about all of these things. And then think about the gift of Jesus Christ and how he offers renewal. And then maybe take some time and pray and ask God, what might that renewal look like if this hope and this Christ became the center of all of these relationships in this coming year? And spend some time reflecting and thinking about that. And then for the love of God, put down your phone. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you. We thank you for your word. We thank you for your son,

Jesus. And Lord, as we celebrate him in a couple of days, we pray that this would be a celebration of real, true, true, deep hope. We pray that this renewal would be something that we glimpse and taste in all kinds of ways. That instead of simply having eyes to see the brokenness, that you would give us eyes to see the renewal. The places where the blossoms are already breaking through the cracked asphalt.

[32 : 12] the beams of sun that break through the clouds. Lord, we pray that you would give us the eyes to see what is already afoot because you are here in the world. And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.