

Order & Purpose

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[0:00] So we begin today this series looking at how we can connect with God through his creation. And although we're out of sync with the 24-7 Global Prayer, we are in sync with the Church of England, which moves at a slightly slower rate.

We are, across the country, across the world, they are encouraging churches to think about creation, what they're calling creation tide, or the season of creation.

And really, the purpose of that is to highlight and celebrate the importance of creation within the Christian faith. Creation, and by that I mean all that God has made, can clearly be explored in many, many ways, and on lots of different angles, perspectives, including creation care, which is increasingly important.

But although I'm sure we'll see the implications for creation care for our series, that isn't our primary focus. Our focus is on connecting with God through creation.

And to do that today, we're going to explore three questions. Why connecting with God through his creation is important. Why we fail to connect with God through his creation.

[1:22] And also then, how we can connect with God through his creation. So, why is it important? Why do we fail? And how we can do it. Okay?

And to answer that question about why it's important that we learn to, or think about, or in fact do, connect with God through his creation. To do that, I want to talk about us, as a church.

And then I'm going to tell you a story. So, as a church, we are seeking to be increasingly inclusive, intergenerational, and inspired.

And particularly in this new season, as has been the subject of many of our prayers today, we are focusing on how we can grow those values as we gather here on Sundays. They are, if you like, the fruit that we are praying for and working towards.

As we welcome others, as we seek God's spirit to inspire us. As we work towards all ages and stages, participating together.

[2:30] But biblically, and spiritually speaking, we will achieve absolutely nothing if we don't do one thing. John 15, verse 5 says, I am the vine, and you are the branches.

If you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing.

Now that word used there, remain, it's sometimes translated as abide, abide in me as I abide in you. It basically means connect. Be connected.

And Jesus is saying, using plenty of imagery from creation, I should add, if you aren't connected to me, you won't grow, and you won't bear fruit.

Which is exactly what you are created to do. So our objective, not just this Sunday and in September, but our objective always, is to get connected and stay connected with Jesus.

[3:36] Now of course there are many ways of doing this, just as there are many ways of staying in relationship with people. But we are honing in on one particular way.

And as the weeks go through, and those who are teaching, and even for our worship, this means that some of you will be learning to connect with God in a new way, an unfamiliar way.

For others, you may be deepening more familiar ways. Or some of you may be rediscovering forgotten pathways that God might be encouraging you to do through the coming weeks.

I too, like Alex, are really looking forward to 24-7 prayer. Because as Alex said, there's countless testimonies about how people have connected in a very special way.

By setting aside that time, going to a designated place of prayer, being part of a global movement of prayer. And we know that that connection can be transformative.

[4:39] But in this creation season, we have this opportunity to explore how we can connect with God through his creation. And we're going to be doing that actually just by looking at these opening

two chapters of the Bible.

And again, for some of you, this will be familiar. For some of you, it will be new. And for some of you, you'll be rediscovering forgotten paths. So, my question to you, church, is, are you up for learning to abide with God by listening and engaging afresh with his creation?

Yes, Vicar. Yes, Vicar. Excellent. Well, I mean, do you see why it might be important? We need to stay connected with God. And God has gifted us the means to do that.

And I believe one of those, as we'll explore today, a central way is learning to engage and connect with him through his creation. We want to be able to do that. Let me tell you something of my own experience in this.

Exactly one year ago, plus one week, we were in the last week of the summer holidays. And my family and I took a family holiday to the west coast of France.

[5:53] And we were staying in one of those chalets. I don't know if you've ever experienced this, but if you move, you either trip over someone or you bump into something. Right? Nice and sort of confined area.

Anyway, so one of these evenings of this holiday, I'm struggling to get to sleep. It's about half eleven at night. And I'm thinking, oh, yeah, I've been reading this book on prayer. Maybe I could do some prayer.

Oh, this would be a good time. So, creep out of bed, you know, creaking. Where can I go to pray? Now, the only place in the chalet that's kind of available is the toilet. So, I'm like, so I go in.

And I think, what am I doing here? The window's open. And I can hear the roaring, the roaring, I can't say it, the roaring of the waves. The beach is about sort of ten minutes away.

I'm like, oh. I could feel it sort of inviting me to come and to go out and to go to the beach. So, I'm in my pyjamas.

[6:50] I'm thinking, why not? Let's just do it. So, I do. I go out. And the roar of the waves as I walk over the dunes to get there. And as I arrive and I, you know, I hear the roar of the waves, I look up and the skies are open.

The most incredible array of stars. You can see the Milky Way so clearly. And it just drew out praise from me. And I just couldn't help worship.

I was singing lots, fortunately covered by the roar of the waves. And, you know, I'm not sure you could call it dancing, but I wasn't standing still. And I had such a powerful sense of God's presence. Not so much from the waves themselves or the starry host, but they were just expressing something of the wonder of God and the power of God that, quite frankly, was overwhelming.

I was overwhelmed with God's presence. And so, I actually stayed there for over an hour, looking like a complete wally on the beach in my pyjamas. And, you know, quickly looking around.

[7:59] Did anyone else join me? No, no, not at all. Anyway, at the end of that time, I just felt it was right. But it was during that time I had a really strong impression that God wanted to do a new thing with me and my family.

And actually, a new season was beginning. That was the impression I got from my time of worship at midnight on the beach. Anyway, so I started to notice that the clouds were kind of coming in. And I head back to our chalet. And just as I put my head on the pillow, the heavens opened. It absolutely poured down with rain. So, there was this real sense in which heaven had opened just for me.

It was really special. And I connected with God in a way that, although it wasn't totally new, it felt more profound and significant than I'd ever experienced. And that started a series of signs, of exploring, and openings, and applications, and interviews that led me to discern that God was again calling me to encounter him at the seashore.

But this time for a longer period. And it's good to be here. So, that's part of my story. It was connecting with God through his creation.

[9:13] Now, I asked myself, what might have happened if I'd missed that invitation to connect with him? If I'd ignored the roaring of the waves?

I don't know. I'm sure he would have found a way of getting through to me. But I'm so glad I took that invitation. Because it literally changed the course of my life. God is speaking through his creation all the time.

And I'm sure I miss many opportunities to connect with him through it. And they don't always have to be on that grand scale. Even the sort of subtle, smaller ways in which God reminds us of

something of himself.

Of his presence. Of his power. Of his beauty. Of what he intends for us. And I think to myself. Wouldn't it be excellent? Wouldn't it be awesome?

If I could connect with him more frequently. Through creation. And that leads me on to being curious about, well, why don't I?

[10:24] Why do I so often fail to connect with God through his creation? How is it I can ignore that? How is it I can walk down the street and be oblivious and miss an opportunity for encounter and for transformation?

Well, I want to take it easy on myself and others who are feeling like, oh yeah, maybe that's me too. Because there are significant obstacles to connecting with God through creation.

And of course, being aware of those barriers and those obstacles actually is a first step to overcoming them. And those barriers have been created by a variety of sociological, philosophical and theological influences that have layered up through the ages.

And so if you will indulge me a moment, a very quick historical overview. Okay? Starting in the Bible, Romans 1 verse 20 says, Since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

So that backs up the sort of foundational idea that, as we've heard in our reading, God spoke creation. He expressed himself and he revealed himself to us.

[11:45] However, sin, that is, wanting to do things our own way, separates us from God. And so it distorts, it distorts that sense of God being within and blinds us to that revelation.

And then if you add to that many philosophies, so particularly the ancient Greeks, their philosophy was that they, and that shaped us as the Western world in a huge way, it tends to see created things as lesser than the spiritual unseen things.

And so that, in its philosophy and the way that we think and the way that humans have operated, particularly in the West, minimizes creation's importance in our culture.

And actually, it says dismiss the material world, because we think that the spiritual is more important. So that's another barrier. Moving on quite a bit, the Industrial Revolution.

It began to sever our connection with the rest of creation. You know, we became less reliant on and aware of its seasons and the Earth's needs, the give and take of all those things.

[13:10] And throw into that the Enlightenment, and you could say all the way through to modernity, we have become very focused on scientific reasoning.

In other words, we've been mainly asking the what and how questions, rather than the who and why. And the difference that that makes goes something like this.

You might walk into a kitchen and ask someone, why is the kettle boiling? And that person might reply, well, electric current passes through a high-resistance heating element.

This resistance converts electrical energy into thermal energy. Energy moves from the element to the adjacent water. Direct conduction excites and increases the kinetic energy of water. Heated water at the bottom expands and becomes less dense.

The colder, denser water at the top sinks. This continuous cycle distributes the thermal energy throughout the container of the kettle. The entire body of water approaches a uniform temperature, reaching thermal equilibrium.

[14:13] Energy is absorbed by the liquid water molecules, breaking its intermolecular bonds. And at 100 degrees C, depending on the atmospheric pressure, of course, the water reaches its boiling point. Now that is a legitimate answer to why the kettle is boiling.

But another legitimate answer to why the kettle is boiling is, I'm making a cup of tea. One answer speaks to the mechanics and the method, the other to its purpose.

And they're both true, but they make more complete sense when they're combined together. And what I'm saying is that a focus on the scientific method has sometimes blinded us and society and our culture to the purpose and personality within creation.

And that has impacted our interpretation of not only creation as we look around, but also scripture as we have approached it. And Genesis 1 is a prime example of how these barriers have affected us with connecting with God.

Because at least for the last three centuries, readers have been preoccupied with extracting timeframes and geology and cosmology from these verses.

[15 : 39] Almost to the point of being exercises in missing the point. Because this creation story, as we've already heard it read, speaks of personality and artistry.

It is primarily about meaning and the intent of creation, of beauty and purpose. In the beginning, God.

Here is the central character. And his creative intent is clear from the outset. The spirit, we're told, hovers over the waters, poised.

Such potential. And in fact, the very form of that opening chapter of Genesis is poetic. And it suggests, it invites us to read it as such.

For example, I know we've got English teachers in the room, but let's think for a moment about its structure. You get the first three days where you hear about the form of creation.

[16 : 47] And then days four to six are the filling of that creation. It's a poetic. It's the way the literature works invites us to see it as a piece of artistry.

And there's these repeat motifs. And there was evening. And there was morning. And of course, and he saw that it was good. And there's even rhyme in there.

It's hidden by our English translations. But in verse two, the earth is described as being formless and empty. And the original Hebrew here is *tohu wabohu*. So there's like deliberate wordplay.

It's creative. I want to invite you to consider the verses that Marilyn read, just those first 13 verses, as depicting an artist preparing his canvas and marking out the main brushstrokes of creation.

Or perhaps a composer choosing his symphonic form and sketching out its principal evocative melody.

[17 : 55] And that melody is of his goodness. Or perhaps an author in his prologue to his novel plotting out the central themes that are going to run throughout the story.

Bringing order out of chaos, for example. Light overcoming darkness. Dividing the waters. Bringing life and fruitfulness.

And you'll hear these themes again and again through the Bible. So what I'm saying is that Genesis was never written to answer all our scientific concerns.

Although we can find a lot in there that helps us understand the method. But it is chiefly concerned about the one whom it expresses. And so if we allow the who and the why questions to govern our reading, then actually the force of Genesis 1, and indeed the whole of Scripture, becomes clearer. We start to see the intended purpose for both creation and for our lives as we interpret it that way.

[19 : 07] And we begin to see God's personality, his character, permeate everything about it. It's a bit like a sort of stick of rock. If you remember those good old days of a stick of rock.

Wherever you cut it, you see the name of God, the character of God is there. And I think that's important for many reasons.

We recognize those barriers that our culture has sort of tried to push God out the way when we think about nature. But it also helps us overcome another barrier to connecting with God through his creation.

Because in our post-modern world, if you want to call it that, there are plenty of folk, and you will know many of them, who are attracted to getting back in touch with nature. We can see that's increasingly important, particularly in our creation kind of crisis, an ecological crisis.

They want to get back in touch with nature. But that actually can lead to forms of what's sometimes called animism or pantheism. That is that creation itself is divine.

[20 : 10] That if we worship nature, we are worshipping the divine. Again, let's be careful of our interpretation of the data. Because that conflation of the creator with the created will lead us nowhere.

The Bible's worldview is that while God is intimately involved in his creation, he's also apart from it.

There is a difference between the creator and the creation. A bit like my words in this sermon express something of who I am, but it would be wrong to say that this sermon is somehow me.

If you know what I mean. A bit of philosophical things to think about for us today. Anyway, if we recognise the character, the person being expressed through creation, that is the best start we can make.

That is the foundation for answering the question of how we can connect with God through his creation. Are you with me? So there's a personality. That's what we first have had to realise. That God is expressing himself through his creation.

[21:13] And so my invitation for you is this week. You know, when you go and walk by the sea. We have a lovely seafront here in Clevedon. You walk through the woods. Even as you talk with people.

People made in the image of God. Are you going to give credit to the author? That's going to be on your mind. Is that going to be on your heart? And it's homework for you.

This week, I'd love to invite you to intentionally bring this to mind. We've sung a great hymn about all creatures worship their God and King. Are you? Are you in tune with that worship?

That when we see things of beauty or even obscure, difficult things, are we going to allow that to ask the question?

What does that tell me about God? Perhaps the wind speaks of God's power or his unseen shaping of all that we do. Or perhaps the rain can be a reminder to us of God's life-giving and cleansing work.

[22:15] Do you see how many aspects of creation there are that can draw worship and praise and thought back to God? So I'd invite you this week.

Give yourself some time. Engage all your senses in this exercise of connecting with God through his creation. What might this reveal about God? That's the kind of question we want to be mulling over, meditating on.

And actually, I'm inviting you because I'd love to hear from you. If this is new to you or perhaps this is something that you are revisiting, we, every week in this sort of new format of service, we're going to have a sort of testimony slot, an interview slot where we'll chat to someone about what God's doing in their life.

And if there's something that's revealed to you, you connect with God in a particular way, and you are prepared to share it, we'd love to hear from you. In the coming weeks, we'd love to hear how God is connecting with you and what impact that's made.

Does that make sense? That's an open invitation to you. And just, you know, tap myself on the shoulder, one of the wardens maybe, and I'd love to hear from you about what God's doing in your life, and particularly in this season about how we're connecting with him through creation.

[23:26] God longs to reveal himself. That's his yearning. That's the yearning expressed in these opening chapters of Genesis. As he speaks of himself, creation is made in his image.

And I guess another question for all of us is, not only creation, but if we see ourselves as part of creation, what if we interpreted our whole lives?

With those questions, well, the questions of who and why, rather than how and what. What do I mean by that? I mean, many of us have aspects of our lives which are, what we might say, chaotic, perhaps seemingly formless and empty, to quote from the beginning of Genesis.

And often when we're in those places or those situations, we are asking the what and how questions. How can I get out of this? What's going on here? Give me the process and the method to get me out of here.

When's it going to end? We want timescales, don't we? What if instead, a bit like the chaos there, we sense the spirit of the Lord hovering over us. And we begin to say, what is the potential for God to express himself through this?

[24:40] Where is he making new beginnings? What's he birthing here? What do I need to be aware of in what God is doing? And I know I'm making that sound simple.

And I know that when life is difficult and hard, we are longing for the particular answers that we're looking for. But I would just want to encourage you, where you can, to step back and say, what is God saying in this?

And to help us do that, and we need a guide to help us interpret all that we see and experience in life. And this is where scripture comes in. Because it stops us from making errors in interpreting what God is about and who he is.

Because you see, I could see rain as, you know, God cleansing and bringing you life. But you also might say, oh, God is drowning me. How do we interpret creation to know that it's expressing truly of what God is trying to say?

Scripture is important. And while creation reveals God, we might say, in general terms, scripture reveals the details and informs us about the precise nature of God and his character.

[25:55] And there's no better place to go than Psalm 19. And it brilliantly illustrates this and expresses this sort of double revelation of God.

So I'm going to end in a moment, but I'll end with this. I'll read verses 1 to 6 from Psalm 19. The heavens declare the glory of God.

The skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech. Night after night, they reveal knowledge. They have no speech.

They use no words. No sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth. Their words to the end of the world. In the heavens, God has pitched a tent for the sun.

It's like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run its course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other. Nothing is deprived of its warmth.

[26 : 56] I love that and expresses so much, doesn't it? You notice how the very movement of the sun, or perhaps, you know, the earth's movement, strictly speaking, reminds the psalmist of God, of his love, which is like the arrival of the bridegroom, of a champion rising.

Do you see how that evokes praise? He's connected with God through creation here, folks, in a very profound way. But what's interesting about this psalm is not just that bit, but the very, that's the first half.

The second half of the psalm says this. The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. And so it's gone from creation to scripture, the law of God.

And it's the law of God which informs and tells us specifically of what God has for us. It directs our thoughts. And that's really the key, folks, is that as we seek to understand God, and all of us are seeking him deeply and further, because our understanding as humans is limited, as he wants to reveal himself to us, we need the scriptures to help interpret that and to make sense of what is going around us.

[28 : 19] Because, of course, it's not talking just about Old Testament law, as the psalmist would have been available, but of the whole of scripture, which helps us understand this human that came.

The word made flesh, we're told. The pinnacle of God wanting to reveal himself to humanity. Jesus, who became part of creation in order to firmly connect us with God.

Who, like the rising of the sun, brought light out of darkness. Who, in the waters of baptism, suddenly heaven broke through to earth. Who spread everywhere he went the seeds of God's kingdom, leaving gifts of every variety to bear fruit.

Folks, there are rich pickings throughout God's creation for us to connect with God.

And I think, armed with this guide, and however limited your knowledge of it, God is longing to speak his words of love, grace, mercy, peace, and hope into your lives.

[29 : 30] Amen.