A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“Becoming New”*

2 Corinthians 5.16-21

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On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, Michelangelo painted 9 scenes from the book of Genesis. Among those, the most well known, by far, is the depiction of the creation of Adam. God, in the heavens with a whole host of angels, swoops down to within an arms length of the first man. God reaches out a hand and extends a single finger. That extended finger is separated just the slightest from the limply offered extended hand of the man. That man, a mountain-like creature, broad chested, muscular, handsome, reclines on the rocky earth as if he was earth come to life. Michelangelo takes us to the moment just as humanity comes into being. Creation is coming to life.

When the New Testament searches for language to describe the meaning of salvation, several images are marshalled. Gaining sight, being born again, and becoming new creation: it’s this last one, the image of new creation we’re invited to consider this morning with Second Corinthians. If anyone is in Christ, he is new creation, she is new creation, there is new creation. If our idea of salvation is something less than new creation, we have domesticated and limited what God has done in Christ for the world. God is bringing something new, life from death.

I suppose that’s why Michelangelo made the decision to paint the creation story on the ceiling of the Pope’s chapel. It’s not just a mythical story about what was. It’s a story about what is and what can be. This is not just a story about the creation God did back then in the beginning. It’s a story about what God is doing now, and a reminder there on the ceiling of one of the most important sanctuaries in the world, that the church joins God in the renewal of all things. God is still touching human lives and bringing them to new life. Even where it seems impossible, new life may be closer than you imagine.

It’s well known that English translators do their best with a difficult Greek challenge in 2 Corinthians 5.17. In Greek, the sentence isn’t a complete sentence; it’s more like the kind of shorthand texters use. If anyone is in Christ, new creation. But how are we supposed to interpret that, we wonder. To make it a complete sentence we have to supply something that’s missing. It could be just a colon and exclamation mark: if anyone is in Christ: new creation! Yet that doesn’t really solve the question. Or, as a lot of translations do, it could be written if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. That’s a favorite way of understanding the verse, and it makes the sentence flow for sure, focusing on individual transformation that Christ brings us. To be in Christ is to be made a new creature. The world is made new one redeemed person at a time.

Alternatively, it can be read: if anyone is in Christ, there is new creation. That way of reading the verse doesn’t flow as well within the sentence, but it matches better the following sentence: all things are made new. This way of reading the verse brings forth the cosmically powerful transformation of Christ’s cross. Everything is changed after the cross and resurrection. The world is changed, even if we don’t see it yet. Well, that seems right too. So that’s why people go back and forth about how to read this. Either reading is grammatically defensible, either reading is theologically profound, and each reading highlights a dimension of Christ’s salvation.

What gets lost a bit in the discussion of the words that aren’t there is the drama unveiled through the words that are there: new creation. St. Paul could hardly have found more exciting or more encompassing words to describe the change that Christ brings.

Invoking the language of creation Paul would have been thinking about the creation stories in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Both of those stories give us images of what it means to be created by our Creator. In Genesis 1, God brings humans to life by speaking a Word. In Genesis 1, everything is created by God’s speech. Chaos is turned into order. God says, “Let there be light,” and there is light. God says, “Let’s create people,” and there are people. In Genesis 1, God is pictured removed from and over above the world bringing what is to be to be through a divine Word.

In Genesis 2, God is the Creator, but the picture is quite different. In this story, God is pictured on the earth, in a garden. God reaches down into the dirt and from the ground, makes people. The earth is involved. It is the womb from which people come, like a mother birthing a people to life . . .people, into whom God breathes God’s spirit. In Genesis 2, God’s hands are in the dirt and makes *adam* out of the *adamah*, humans out of hummus. Like a gardener, God gets his hands dirty in chapter 2. There dirt under the divine fingernails.

Both creation stories are potent images of becoming new creatures in Christ. In one creation story, God’s Word is spoken and life comes to be. In the Gospels, Jesus’ words have this creative power. Jesus says, “Follow me,” and disciples drop their nets to follow. Jesus says, “get up, take up your mat and walk,” and the lame man gets up and walks. Jesus breaks the bread and blesses the fish and 5000 are fed. These stories are all of the same order: the divine word penetrates creation and brings forth something new that wasn’t there before. Creation responds; it seemingly has no other choice but for legs to walk, eyes to see, bread to multiply, disciples to follow, water to blush into wine. This way of God’s creative work displays divine lordship, but it also might seem a little un-grounded. It’s hard to relate to a being who can make something without getting his hands dirty. It’s perhaps telling that in the first creation story God is called Elohim, a common, generic name for god.

We don’t learn God’s name until Genesis 2 where God is named. God is Yahweh, the Lord God. God is in the garden on the earth. Like a gardener, God sinks his fingers into the earth and draws out a human. Sometimes we have a hard time with this image. It anthropomorphizes God to such an extent that God is almost child-like, playing in the dirt like I used to do in my grandmother’s red-dirt driveway making mud-pies after rain storms. Some people don’t like that image of God. They prefer their God safe, way up in the heavens where God’s robe won’t get dirty.

But I think it’s beautiful and also where Michelangelo comes up just short. I wonder what he, undisputed master that he was, would have done if he had actually depicted the story of God not just hovering above the earth, reaching out a finger to Adam, but God standing on the earth, sinking his fingers into the soil to bring forth a human out of its depths. I think this would have been marvelous. Right there on the pope’s ceiling to have a reminder of the utter depths to which grace must reach for men and women to be saved. If there’s going to be new life anywhere, if there’s going to be new creation, it’s going to come from the death of the old. The old you’re living in dies and becomes compost for the new that is being born in you. Where God’s going to bring new life, God’s got to sometimes reach down deep into the muck. And where the church is part of God’s redemptive recreation of the world, we’re all going to have to get our hands dirty.

I think it would have been marvelous had Michelangelo done something like that. He could have. Jesus showed him the way. Jesus didn’t paint but in a story he painted a picture with words of what it looks like for new creation to come from the depths of the earth. A younger son denies his created-ness, curses his father, breaks away from his identity in his past, disregards any thought of his future, becomes an idol unto himself, an “I am,” throwing off whatever I was, not caring about what I will be, only I am. I am what I want to be today. I am who I want to be today. The man imagined he was ascending to be a god-among-men, only to realize he become less than a man. He was created in God’s image but had shattered his creaturely-ness. It was broken. He was broken. There we find him in Jesus’ parable, a broken man: no friends, no family, no past, no future, no food. He’d lost it all and lost himself along the way. There we meet him in the pig pen, feeding unclean animals with food he’s not even allowed to eat. This isn’t a glorious Adam reclining on the earth waiting for God’s divine touch to animate him to life. This is what’s left of a man nearly unmade.

The way Jesus puts it “When he came to himself”. That’s kind of a cliché--“When he came to himself,” but there’s a profound meaning to it. Coming to yourself is a way of saying he woke up from the nightmare he’d been living with hope that he might be even slightly restored. He got up and headed home. From that moment on, he was a new creation even if he didn’t realize it yet. Grace had reached down into the depths of the earth, sunk her fingers into the muck and mire of his life and from the husks and scraps left of his life drawn up a human being. He was made new, even if he couldn’t yet see the transformation within him until he was met by his father, running to embrace him and welcome him home.

This week, I had the honor of speaking at a planning commission hearing on a rezoning request by the Sunshine Recovery House for a house they want to purchase on 15th street. The commission allots each speaker a maximum of 3 minutes to speak. It’s the twitter version of public discourse, but it’s a good idea. In 3 minutes, you have to say everything you have to say. Don’t get any ideas, around here. Several of us who are more or less professional wordsmiths spoke in favor of Summer’s plans and in favor of the rezoning that has been requested. I think we all did a good job, if I do say so myself. But none of it really mattered. Oh, I don’t mean the commission was against the rezoning. They voted for it unanimously. What I mean is that none of what we “professional talkers” had to say mattered compared to one woman who came down the aisle to the podium. With quivering voice, she introduced herself gave her name and address, as we all did. And she said, “I am 60 years old and have been sober for 2 years. The Sunshine Recovery House saved my life. They gave me a safe place to live, accountability, a community, encouragement. Everything I needed to get my life back. I had been using since I was 12 years old. No matter what I did I couldn’t break out of it. No matter what I tried, I always fell back. But then I came to the recovery home. It saved my life. I was able to stay sober, get a job, and buy a house. I’m 60 years old, and for the first time in my life I’m a productive member of society.”

She’s a lot more than that! She’s not just clean. She’s not just a better version of herself. That woman is new. She’s a new creation. God reached down into the dirt and made a new life out of her. Using the hands of faithful servants as his own hands, God reached down into the depths. Jesus’ hands get pierced. Our hands get dirty. God is redeeming the world through us. We are ambassadors for Christ sharing with the world what we can see by the grace of God. The world is made new. All things are already made new. There are lots of people in the dirt, but God is good at using dirt.

Thomas Merton had been living in his monastery for about a decade when he was sent out to run some errands in Louisville, the nearby city. He’d been taught, or else had just come to believe that monks were holy people and people outside the monastery were . . . a little sketchy. They were not quite sanctified, they were less than what God wanted them to be. I think were we confronted with such a charge would say, well ya, that’s right, I don’t know about those guys in there, but us out here, we’re a lot sketchy, we’re a lot less than what God wants us to be. So maybe Merton was right about us. But then, he writes, . . .

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world...

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.  
  
Then, it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...But this cannot be seen, only believed and ‘understood’ by a peculiar gift.”

Behold, everything has become new. Exactly where Michelangelo came up short. God is painting this picture for the world on our hearts. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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