The Very Good Gospel
Chapter 3 ~ Two Trees and the Fall

- *What would be your personal commentary regarding life on planet earth presently? How would you describe/articulate the state/condition of humanity? Would you say everything is peachy, hunky-dory? Would you say things are not good, right, or as they should be? What is going well/right? What needs attention, resolution, repair? Why are things as they are?*

The Bible offers its own commentary regarding life on planet earth. Within the first three chapters of the Bible we see things go from "very good" to corrupted and cursed (aka The Fall). What caused this breakdown? Simply put, distrust and disobedience.

One way we can describe what we see and experience on planet earth is remnants and artifacts of the original goodness mixed with the consequences/ramification of the Fall. The whole rest of Scripture is the story of God rescuing and restoring the original goodness of His creation. And just as humans had a part to play in the Fall, humans have a part to play in the restoration of things.

- *Do you buy the Bible's explanation of why things are as they are and what God is up to in the midst of it all? If so, how does your life reflect alignment with the Biblical trajectory? If not, what alternative explanation would you offer?*

- *How familiar are you with the book of Genesis? Can you name the key people and events described in Genesis? What is a key takeaway from Genesis?*

The book of Genesis has 50 chapters in it. (Though please keep in mind that chapters and verses were a much later addition to Scripture…to make it easier for referencing.) The previous chapter in LSH's book focused on Genesis chapter 1. This chapter focuses on Genesis 2-3.

- *How important do you think it is for Christians to be familiar with, and understand, Scripture? (And why do you think that?) How would you describe your own handle on/understanding of Scripture?*

Did you know that multiple writers contributed to the book of Genesis and that there are two different Creation accounts within the first two chapters of Genesis? What are we to make of this? Our modern mindset tends to see this as a conflict, a discrepancy, a contradiction that needs resolving. But there is not really an issue here that needs to be fixed. The "problem", if there is one, has more to do with our faulty expectations and lack of understanding about the Bible. There is no tension that needs to be resolved; rather there is insight that needs to be gained. The invitation is to take the Bible as it is, not to make it into what we think it ought to be.

(If this is all new to you, please take it as an invitation to dig deeper and expand your understanding of Scripture, not as an excuse to avoid it. A good place to start to beef up your Bible knowledge is www.bibleproject.com)

In Genesis 1 we're introduced to "God" by the general title "Elohim". In Genesis 2 we're introduced to a very specific name "Yahweh Elohim", usually translated "the LORD God" in our English Bibles. "Yahweh" is the name God gives Himself in the dialogue with Moses in Exodus chapter 2. It means "I Am Who I Am" (or "I Will Be What I Will Be"…or just "I AM" for short).

"*God is supreme and self-existent yet personal, present, touching, connecting with, and molding humanity out of the dust. God is personally invested. And God doesn't zap humanity to life. No, God kisses us. The breath of God makes human life possible.*"…"*Only love would compel a self-existent God who can't be coerced by any higher power to pull out all the stops and craft a world that is not only functional but beautiful and abundant. Love does that.*" (pg. 41)

The best place to start is with our understanding of God. LSH reminds us of what God is like. Do we trust God's goodness and His goodness toward us? We will not get very far without such trust. (And, as a reminder, it's a lack of trust that got us into the situation in the first place.) This harkens back to our 2022 study of *The Good And Beautiful God* by James Bryan Smith, which invited us to examine our narratives (our deeply held, even if not acknowledged or articulated, understanding/beliefs) about God.

One important takeaway from the first couple chapters of the Bible is that in God's domain and dominion there is extravagant abundance. Contrast that to how the world as we know it operates…which is on the basis of scarcity. Our economics and politics (and that's a chicken vs egg thing, isn't it?) presume scarcity and run on a scarcity model/mindset. It doesn't matter if we're talking capitalism or socialism…they both begin with scarcity…i.e. There's not enough to go around.

If there's not enough to go around, then who gets it and who doesn't? And who gets to make that call? (These are political questions…based on economic questions.) One of the points LSH makes in this chapter is that a consequence of the Fall is that it leads to distrust, domination, confusion, and shame among humans (see pg. 49) But have we ever stopped to askwhether or not the presumption of scarcity is accurate? Or, is it possible that scarcity is a self-fulfilling prophecy? Could a scarcity worldview be a key false narrative we've bought into that is holding us back from experiencing what God has for us? What could it look like if we actually functioned with an abundance mindset/paradigm? Sadly, that seems like such a foreign idea to us. Our imagination for such a reality is atrophied.

- *How are you affected by scarcity thinking? In what ways are you prone to thinking and functioning with a scarcity mindset?*

- *How might we as a church family confront and combat scarcity thinking? Or, on a more positive note, how might we live out an abundance mindset in our life together? (Is that even something you want?)*

Please allow me to turn our attention to a couple snapshots we see of the early Church. In Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35 we see the first followers of Jesus working out the reality of God's Kingdom amongst them. One of the first things they confronted was the inequity of material resources. To say it another way, the reality of God's Kingdom having come was that an abundance mindset started to get lived out.

Additionally, and without getting too deep into it, the laws of Sabbath years, and particularly the year of Jubilee, in the Old Testament (see Leviticus 25), along with Paul's comments in II Corinthians 8, demonstrate that there was always an expectation that God's people would confront/challenge a scarcity mentality through their life together. (Reminder: How we order our life together is the basic function of politics.)

- *How does your faith in Jesus, your apprenticeship to Jesus, affect you financially?*

- *Can you identify the presumptions from which you operate financially/economically and politically? Can you identify where those presumptions come from? Please explain.*

Another basic function of politics has to do with power…i.e. who has it, how it's used, etc. As LSH points out, "*Love shares power*." (pg. 41) (Remember, God is Love, thus Love is the primary characteristic of God's kingdom.) God's love is seen in how He shares His dominion with us…in our primary vocation of keeping, caring, protecting, and naming God's good creation. How are we doing with that? From my vantage point it appears humans tend to consolidate power and resources, thereby creating and reinforcing scarcity, as opposed to distributing/sharing power and resources for the good of all. (Please tell me if you see things differently.)

- *Consider the power you have. How are you using it? How did you come to have it? Who are you sharing it with? Who is sharing power with you? Do you want more power? If so, why…or what would you do with it?*

- *With power comes responsibility. What are you responsible for? How are you fulfilling those responsibilities in a way that reflects God's likeness in you?*

On page 43 LSH asks the question, "*What does love require?*" She expresses the answer to that question as connection, interdependence, and choice. She goes on to develop the idea that this requires knowledge and trust. For the Biblical writers, knowledge or knowing wasn't so much based on information and intellect, but rather gained through embodied experience. Hence, "*And Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived…*" (Genesis 4:1) is a euphemism for sex. To "know" in the Biblical sense is intimate and experiential. So the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" represents a choice: will humans trust God or will humans define good and evil on their own? Do we trust that God has our best interest in mind or do we need to learn by (painful) experience what happens when we violate His good boundaries?

To love God (which is the first and primary commandment) is to trust and obey God. Jesus reiterates this in John 14:15, "*If you love Me, keep My commands.*" But in order for love to be

truly love, we must have the choice/option to not obey…but not without (natural) consequences. Choosing to disobey, along with the consequences that follow, is biblically and theologically called "sin". Sin is, and causes, separation. But we were made for connection. Peace/shalom, as you'll recall from our Advent focus on peace, is completeness/wholeness. And, as LSH states, "*…shalom is both a state of being and the state of relationships…Shalom is both the antidote to sin's separation and the fruit of loving and trusting God.*" (pgs. 49 & 50)

To say it another way, we (humans) caused sin and separation; God wants and is working toward peace/shalom and reconciliation/restoration. But the choice to trust or not, to obey or not, is always before us. Will we trust and cooperate with God, or will we choose/trust "*…the illusion of human fulfillment apart from God?*" (pg. 46) Sadly, the bulk of human history reveals a strong tendency to not trust/obey God.

This demonstrates the power of lies/false narratives…which is basically what the serpent presented to the first humans. The serpent insinuated that God could not be trusted and offered an alternative…it told the humans that they would be like God if they ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. *"The tragedy is that they were already made in God's likeness (see Genesis 1:26)."* (pg. 48) How easily we forget; how easily we twist/distort, distrust, and are led astray.

- *How does your life reflect trust and obedience to God? How does our life as a church family reflect trust and obedience to God?*

- *What lies/false narratives do you observe people falling for?*

"*The rest of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation is God's restoration and redemption plan, God's plan to redeem the world and restore shalom.*" (pg. 49) This is OUR story. This is the plan and project we are called into…which hearkens back to the point and purpose of Creation from the outset. But we must recognize that everything depends on us trusting God (i.e. loving God, obeying God). (Recall from our focus on Love during Advent that love is not a feeling/emotion…it's a decision, a choice, a commitment to do right/good for others.) As the Fall illustrates, our trust–or distrust–of God has consequences for all of Creation.

As LSH points out in her concluding section "Implications", all of this is much bigger than "a personal relationship with Jesus"…though it would include that. Our faith is cosmic in scope. We need to understand that we were created to rule over God's very good creation in a way that upholds that very goodness. That being the case, life is about more than our personal fulfillment/satisfaction. Our vision of life/reality, and the meaning and purpose of it all, needs to align with God's original purpose and design for all things.

- *How does your life reflect God's design and purpose? What do you spend the bulk of your energy on? (And why?)*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Evaluating Our Desires/Longings

Last week we evaluated, or took inventory of, our connections/relationships with God, ourselves, others, creation, etc. This week we're going to do something similar, but with our longings/desires.

Set some time aside to sit with Jesus for a bit and name/identify your deepest desires/longings. (If this sounds familiar, we've done a similar exercise a couple of different times in the past.) Feel free to use LSH's prompts in here "Reflection Exercise" on page 51.

Spend some time examining your desires/longings: Why do you want what you want? Where do those desires come from? What are you currently doing in order to satisfy/fulfill those longings? Does that align with God's good way of love and shalom (i.e. how is your pursuit affecting others)?

In prayer, trust them to God…perhaps to fulfill them, possibly to change them, maybe to give you patience and strength as you wait for them. Remember that you are a beloved child of God. You are the image and likeness of God. You are in the process of becoming someone who can rule and reign with God over His good creation. How does that relate to or affect your desires and longings?

Spend some time reflecting on Psalm 73:25-26, "*Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*"