

Service of the Word

Sunday, August 9th, 2020

Scripture Reading – Genesis 1:26 – 31 (ESV)

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” ²⁹ And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Second Reading – Revelation 22:1 – 5 (ESV)

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

The Feast of the Lord

Genesis 1: 26 – 31; Revelation 22: 1 – 5

Our Scripture reading this morning highlighted a number of things, but among them, the fact that it wouldn't be much of a stretch to say that the Bible begins and ends with something about food. The Genesis passage is obvious. When God took hold of the soil—the stuff of the earth—and created man in His own image, the first thing that He did, as we read in verse 28, was to bless them, and he blessed them by speaking—by entering into a covenant with them. The rest of verse 28 goes on to say,

And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Genesis 1: 28 (ESV)

In other words, God gave them a charge—a task. He gave them a stewardship over all creation, to “have dominion” and to subdue the earth. Then he gave them the resources that they would need to accomplish the task. Verse 29:

²⁹ And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. Genesis 1: 29 (ESV)

If we take Jesus what Jesus said in Matthew 4 seriously (and I think we have to), that

⁴ “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Matthew 4:4 (ESV)

then it’s apparent that in His first words to His new formed creation, God gave man literally all that he needed for both body and soul. He spoke His word and entered into covenant, but then he gave the riches of the earth to feed those he appointed stewards over creation.

In his book, **Blessed Are the Hungry**, author Peter Leithart highlights the vast difference between the biblical story and the creation myths of the ancient world. He writes,

Formed from the blood of the rebel god Kingu, Marduk made man to “establish for his fathers the great food offerings,” to bear “food-offerings...for their gods and goddesses.”

In the margin to E.A. Speiser’s translation of this Akkadian myth, known as the Enuma Elish, there is a cross reference to Genesis 1: 26 (“Let us make man as Our image after Our likeness”). No doubt there are shadowy parallels between the two creation accounts, but the differences could hardly be starker, particularly regarding the role of food in the two stories. For the Akkadians, man exists to feed the gods; in the Bible, God creates man and then offers *him* food. In fact, God’s gift of food is the climax of the six days of creation. Day six does not end with man’s creation as the image of God or with God’s command that Adam rule the earth, its oxen and its beasts. Genesis 1 ends, rather, with a menu. ⁱ

And such a menu!

“Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. Genesis 1: 29 (ESV)

As in Leithart,

The radical difference between the Creator and all idols is evident here: idols demand a quid pro quo and enter into the human cycle of exchange because they have needs and desires that humans can meet, whether for bread or affirmation or pleasure. Since they are creatures falsely treated as gods, idols cannot help being just as dependent as all other creatures are. Precisely because He is Creator, however, the living God needs nothing that He has made, and creatures can never offer a sufficient quid for His quo. Everything that creatures have, including our very existence, is a gift of sheer grace, an overflow of the self-giving love that is God’s eternal character. Like Marduk, Yahweh ends His creative work by setting a table. Quite unlike Marduk, who wants to secure his own portion, Yahweh sets His table for man. ⁱⁱ

Of course, we need to be careful. The point has been made recently that God does not call us to worship and serve as though he needs anything,

...since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. Acts 17: 25b (ESV)

In Psalm 50, verse 12 God said,

¹² If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Psalm 50:12 (ESV)

God did not create mankind because *he* needed something from us, but having said that he doesn't exist "for" us, like some sort of cosmic vending machine, fully stocked with all that delights us. His gift of provision to Adam and Eve was part of His covenant. He took hold, and called them to serve—to worship—filling the creation and subduing it, exercising dominion over the rest of creation as faithful stewards under God. This is why, as we've seen, He gives to all mankind "life and breath and everything." Because he calls us, one and all having feasted on His grace, to serve with the strength that He provides. Peter makes this clear in the New Testament. He wrote,

¹⁰ As each has received a gift, *use it to serve one another*, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, **as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—**

And why?

in order that in everything **God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him** belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 1 Peter 4:10–11 (ESV)

When God entered into covenant with our first parents, he provided all that they would need to serve faithfully in the work that he had called them to do. This was certainly of benefit to them, but the point was not about them at all, rather, "To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

We see a similar dynamic in our second text, from the book of Revelation, chapter 22. All the way over at the other end of the Bible, John wrote,

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:1–2 (ESV)

Without doubt, there is benefit there for redeemed mankind. The water of life flows from the throne of God, and the tree of life, now restored and made available again to the people of God, bears a variety of fruit, and even its leaves "were for the healing of the nations." What Adam and Eve lost when they looked to a different menu, determined to depend on themselves rather than submitting to God, is restored in the New Creation. The tree of life—God's perfect provision for His people—is given again for the healing of the world. And,

³ No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it,

And again, why? The verse concludes,

...his servants will worship him.

Not only that, but

⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, **and they will reign forever and ever.** Revelation 22:3–5 (ESV)

So, full circle here. In Genesis 1 we read that man was created to rule—to

have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Genesis 1: 28 (ESV)

And in Revelation 22

...the Lord God will be their light, **and they will reign forever and ever.** Revelation 22:3–5

as the stewards that God intended us to be from the very beginning. Not reigning **over** God—of course not—but reigning over creation as servants of God—worshiping Him in the task to which we have been called. Remember verse 4?

...his servants will worship him. Revelation 22: 4 (ESV)

And if you’ve detected a theme here, not just for the sermon but for the whole of Scripture, all I can do is compliment your powers of observation. There’s a reason why the book begins and ends in a garden. There’s a reason why it begins and ends with the servants of God called to worship. There’s a reason why, throughout, God provides all that we need in body and soul to be the people he has called us to be in Christ Jesus. “His servants will worship him,” indeed, but, as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches

...the righteousness which can pass God’s scrutiny must be entirely perfect and must in every way measure up to His divine law.

But,

Even the very best we do in this life is imperfect and stained with sin...

So, God has provided. God has provided a Redeemer.

In Christ I am right with God and heir to life everlasting...

But more still,

We believe that our good God, **mindful of our crudeness and weakness**, has ordained sacraments for us to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us and also to nourish and sustain our faith.

Which is the next movement in our order for Worship. God takes hold, calling us to come into His presence. Reminded of our inadequacy (otherwise known as sin), we come, but we come confessing our need of Christ, who is then presented to us in the word of the gospel, which calls us again to follow. But “mindful of our crudeness and weakness,” God “has ordained sacraments.”

He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what he enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us.

For they are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is, of course, the sacrament

by [which] we are received into God's church and set apart from all other people and alien religions that we may be dedicated entirely to Him, bearing His mark and sign. It also witnesses to us that He will be our God forever, since he is our gracious Father.

More about that another week, if the Lord is willing.

But let's focus for just a few moments on the Feast of the Lord—Holy Communion—that earthly, visible manifestation of the marriage supper of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, to which he invites us as a memorial offering, and the climax of our worship. I could (and I want to) dwell on this at some length, but for today, let's simply call to mind the words used to describe the sacraments in general and the Lord's Supper in particular, in the Belgic Confession. Even so,

mindful of our crudeness and weakness, [God] ordained sacraments for us...

And indeed, He did. In the great commission, Jesus said,

¹⁸ ...“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, **baptizing them** in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... Matthew 28:17–19 (ESV)

And, again, more about that later, but notice at least that baptism is an ordinance—God ordained it. Jesus commanded it.

He did the same for the supper when he said,

²⁵ “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 1 Corinthians 11:25 (ESV)

...mindful of our crudeness and weakness, [God] ordained sacraments for us, **to seal his promises in us...**

And this gives us at least a glimpse of why the sacrament comes at the culmination of the liturgy—our service of worship. By that time, we have heard the word—in the call to worship and the call to confession, in the assurance of pardon, and in the reading and preaching of Scripture—and God, having spoken in all of these, then **seals** His promises to us in the partaking of bread and cup. The sacraments

were instituted by God

says the Heidelberg,

so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel and might put his seal on that promise.

So, God is at work here to make us understand “**more clearly**” the promise of the gospel; just in case we missed it earlier in the service; just in case (because of our weakness) we need a more tangible word of assurance to remind us that all of our sins are completely forgiven, and that “God grants and credits to [us] the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if [we] had never sinned nor been [sinners], as if [we] had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for [us].

In this, he pledges Lord’s Day after Lord’s Day, the very same good will and grace that He sealed to us in the sacrament of Baptism. He reminds us that we are in Christ and Christ is in us; that we belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

And finally, “**to nourish and sustain our faith**”—to provide us with the spiritual strength that we need to serve Him fully and faithfully, to walk in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ Jesus, and to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold (and takes hold) of us. And let me close this morning with words from Article 35 of the Belgic Confession.

To support the physical and earthly life God has prescribed for us an appropriate earthly and material bread which is as common to all as life itself also is. But to maintain the spiritual and heavenly life that belongs to believers he has sent a living bread that came down from heaven; namely Jesus Christ, who nourishes and maintains the spiritual life of believers when eaten—that is, when appropriated and received spiritually by faith.

To represent to us this spiritual and heavenly bread Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of his body and wine as the sacrament of his blood. He did this to testify to us that just as truly as we take and hold the sacraments in our hands and eat and drink it in our mouths...so truly we receive into our souls, for our spiritual life, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior. We receive these by faith, which is the hand and mouth of our souls.

Now it is certain that Jesus Christ did not prescribe his sacraments for us in vain, since he works in us all that he represents by these holy signs...

In that way Jesus Christ remains always seated at the right hand of God his Father in heaven—but he never refrains on that account to communicate himself to us through faith.

For, as we read earlier in Article 33,

[The Sacraments] are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, **by means of which God works in us...**

(and if we would claim the heritage of the reformation, and indeed, of Scripture, we need very much to take hold of this)

[The Sacraments] are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, **by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.** So, they are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us, for their truth is Jesus Christ, without whom they would be nothing.

Even so, at the culmination of our worship, we come to the table to remember and believe that the body and precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ was shed for the complete forgiveness of all of our sin.

And while we have not been able to partake at the table this morning, let me close with the prayer that closes that service.

Almighty God, we give to you our humble and hearty thanks, that you in your great mercy have given us your Son to be our Savior from sin and to be our constant source of faith, hope, and love. We bless you for permitting us [as often as we are able] to show forth his death and to receive the communion of his body and blood through the holy sacrament. We praise you for uniting us more fully with the body of Christ, and for assuring us [through the feast of our Lord] that we are heirs of your heavenly kingdom. Grant that our commemoration of his death may help to daily increase our faith, to establish our hope, and to strengthen our love. Enable us henceforth to live always for him who gave himself for us, even our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

- i Leithart, Peter J.; Blessed are the Hungry; Canon Press, Moscow, ID; pages 17 – 18.
- ii Leithart, Peter J.; Blessed are the Hungry; Canon Press, Moscow, ID; page 18