



The Poet and the Poem (A Sermon)¹

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Many years ago my father, always the teacher, opened a large book to show me something he valued. The book was his copy of Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. What he valued was not the book, however, but a theological understanding. He pointed out that where the Bible speaks of God as "maker" of heaven and earth, and where our ancient creeds speak about God as "creator" of all that exists, the word used is *poietes*. *Poietes*, defined as the maker, the builder. The other word he pointed out was the word for the thing that was made, which in biblical Greek is the *poiema*. Both of these words eventually found their way into English, where today we have the words *poet* and *poem*. He folded his hands and put it concisely, "God is the poet and creation is the poem," which is inclusive of us. A poem, of course, is the self-expression of the poet, a self-expression of something with form and beauty and, above all, meaning. From that we can draw some quick lines of understanding. That means Minnesota is a poem. That means this North Shore, all of Superior, the entire Superior Forest is a poem. That means you are a poem, too. That means we have an author, and I want to add that we all have the same author, who rejoices in the inhabited world and delights in the human race (Prov 8:31).

¹ This sermon was given as part of a Season of Creation emphasis, September 9, 2018, at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Grand Marais, Minnesota. Texts for the day: Gen 1:1–13; Rom 1:18–23; John 1:1–5, 14.

*There are many ways to think about God as creator and about the world God created. Building on the biblical word *poietes* (creator) leads to an understanding of the Creator as poet and the creation as poem.*

Creator and *maker* are perfectly fine words to describe God's creative impulse, but there is another shade of meaning, there is another hue in the palette of colors when the meaning of poet is applied. And something about the way we respond to the creation gives greater credence to this notion. We think of creation as being imbued with an inherent quality so special. I know you, I have heard your wonder and your deep appreciation for this land. Yes, I understand from many conversations with many of you, this land, these waters, these forests are not in your estimation just utilities to be consumed. The way you describe your experience makes me think of someone expressing their admiration for a work of art. You tell me about sunrises or sunsets of remarkable beauty. In your descriptions, the sun doesn't just go down, it does so with wow and wonder. In the springtime you tell me about how the gentle changing hues of green painting the ridge above the lake just reach right in and touch your spirit. Listening to you corroborates the idea that God didn't just make something that is good for us or that benefits us, that nourishes us. God did all of that, it is true, but did so with flair and made beauty, flavor, and harmony qualities that are intrinsic, that are part of the created reality. Very soon, the fall couplet of the poem that the Sawtooth Mountain Ridge is will be written in amazing colors unseen back in the spring when the leaves were just budding out in pale green. Where did they get that burgundy and flame, where did the stunning yellows of birch and the rich gold of tamarack come from? From an artist who didn't have to create art for our lives to be, but created this poem as remarkable and as delightful as it is simply because God is a poet.

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Each year Hedstrom Lumber Company gives away trees, and each year I am amazed as I stand in a long line of people waiting on a cold early May morning to get their free order. Free trees—what a gift. Just think about all those seedlings planted by all those individuals all over Cook County. What a great participation in God's work. What great responsibility is exercised; are we therefore poets of the forest? Of course, God does not necessarily need us to do this. Each year as my family returns to our favorite blueberry patch, we witness the Jack Pines growing taller. Now they tower over our heads on that landscape that the Ham Lake fire cleared. According to God's plan, to have seeds broadcast by the four winds on cleared land works very well, and those trees are growing great despite all the traffic of blueberry pickers. And yet our participation, though not needed there, is also part of the plan; according to the word, humanity completes the garden of God.

Here is a silly question with an obvious answer. Why does it matter that we have trees? What is the driving, compelling reason to maintain and cultivate or preserve wooded areas? We can answer in a variety of ways. Because wild places

restore the soul. Because fall colors warm the heart, because beauty is good, because trees produce clean air, because trees provide delicious fruit, because trees reduce erosion, because trees are habitat for all kinds of creatures, because trees provide homes for people, because people like to hike and hunt in forests. Yes, and more, I could add because people are moved by their relationship to the earth.

And yet this creation account in Genesis provides another reason—because God planted them. God composed the poem that they are. We care because God declared their beauty in psalms, because trees are spiritual symbols mentioned by prophets, because trees illustrated stories told by Jesus. I find that the poetry of Genesis teaches me to value what God placed here. Just as God’s word teaches me to value the children of God and treat them with dignity and grace, with forgiveness and love, just as God has afforded me, so also this story teaches me to value the very trees that surround us on the North Shore or anywhere in all of creation, for they are brought forth of the ground that we are. They are valued by God; they should be valued by those whom God placed in the garden “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). And so we not only appreciate the fall colors, we strive to keep them bright for generations to come, so that our great-great-great grandchildren and beyond will be blessed to see the poet’s work in the garden God has bestowed on us all.

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I want to share one more thing about the first chapter of Genesis: it is itself a poem. It doesn’t look like it in the paragraph form we have in our bulletin; but in the original, in its rhythm, in its repetition and symmetry and sequence it is poetic. It has long been thought to be a liturgy for worship for the ancient people of God, inspired at a time when they lived as captives among people who held a dark and foreboding view of reality. These other people idolized power and might and employed violence and cruelty to achieve their goals. They thought people were born of darkness, so violence and oppression were justified. Over against this life view the people of God were given this litany of goodness. The liturgy of Genesis 1 is a bold contradiction to the dark and a lyrical affirmation of God’s life-giving word. Over and over in their creation account, they confessed their trust in God who creates, and the refrain of their liturgy proclaims what God creates is good. And by the time they reached the sixth day of the creation account in their liturgy, they recited God’s ultimate pronouncement: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31a). What a beautiful thing to say about the world and what a blessing to you.

The first chapter of Genesis is the perfect way to begin the account of the poet, who spoke and all creation came to be, characterized by grace and unceasing

generosity, the very qualities of God we depend upon. The liturgy of creation in Genesis invites us also to recite our faith in the goodness of God, celebrate the beauty of the Earth, and extend the blessings we have been given in this word full of grace and truth. Amen. ☩

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