

**“Look Up & Out”**  
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**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
**Rehoboth Beach, Delaware**

This past Tuesday morning, not even 24 hours after our first ever Ice Cream on Us event took place in the church yard, Westminster Presbyterian Church received a hand-written thank-you note. It was hand-delivered to us by a neighborhood woman with her grandson. Elder Silvia Ritchie was heading into the church that morning when she saw them come into our church yard. Silvia remembered the little boy from the night before because she had helped him get some cookies. They were still gushing about the event, overflowing with gratitude, when they handed Silvia this thank-you note to share. Here is what it says: “Dear neighbors—Thank you for such a delightful and delicious evening at the ice cream social; fun for adults and children of all ages. We will take this fun idea home with us, to share with our family and neighbors. God bless you for your goodness. The McClafferty family.”

Wow! “God bless you for your goodness!” I don’t know if there is a higher praise a faith community could receive from a neighbor—someone who, until last night, we would have called a stranger, an out-of-towner, but who we now and they now feel specially connected to—even after just a few hours on a summer night.

“Goodness!” To sum up a pleasant summer evening of music, laughter, ice cream and sweets, games, prizes, lots of conversations and new acquaintances as “goodness” feels just about right to me. As I spoke with countless people, folks from Westminster, folks from the community, folks from the neighborhood, folks in town for the summer or just for a week, I kept coming back to the idea that after such a hard year, after all we had been through, after so much loneliness, isolation, and disconnection from one another, the event just struck me as plain good for our souls. On both an individual and a collective level, we needed that Ice Cream on Us event. Desparately. We needed it to remember that there is more that can connect us together than keep us apart. We needed it to remember that when we all do a little, it can add up to a lot. We needed it to remember that there is something special, magical even, about gathering together, in the flesh, making connections, venturing small forays into meeting someone new. We needed it to remember that a community is healthiest and the most fun when a cross-section of generations all come together, each adding their gifts, their wisdom, their leadership, and contribution to the mix. We needed it to remember that “ice cream, get your free Hopkins ice cream,” will always be a hit!

For some of us, the opening words of the creation account in Genesis recall to our minds the overly-interpretive illustrations from children's Bibles, or felt-board Sunday school materials (raise your hand if you remember felt-board lessons) with the modest Adam and Eve and uncharacteristically happy animals. Others might recall the glorious image of the creation of the *Adam* that covers the Sistine chapel. Still others maybe remember a crisis of faith they experienced when first juxtaposing the creation account with the content of a high school biology class.

Whatever image is called to mind for you, I would ask you to set it aside for this morning. Hopefully hearing the passage read from *The Message* already helped you along in that process. I want to ask you to set it aside for this morning because I want to remind all of us that while Genesis 1 constitutes the beginning of the Old Testament, it does not constitute the beginning of the story as it initially developed. That story, the creation of God's people through the exodus, began with another story of darkness and chaos and the division of waters, enshrined in one of the oldest songs in Scripture, Exodus 15: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (v.1).

What this means is that the setting of Genesis 1, comes much later in Israel's history — most likely during the time of exile, when Israel's life and hope and forward progress were mired in an entirely different sort of "soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness" as Peterson so vividly puts it in *The Message*.

Try and imagine this: if you were an Israelite exile in Babylon, torn away from the order of Temple life, your ancestral land and the routine worship that had ordered your universe, then one of the only places to turn for hope was the created order of sunrise and sunset, days and years, fish and fowl and great sea monsters — all of which together pointed toward some order, some kind of goodness that even foreign captivity could not erase or subdue.

When the scarlet thread of Israel's saving history seemed lost in the affairs of nations and armies, God's people looked up and out, and perhaps recited Genesis 1:1-2:4a in its entirety. There, in the midst of poetry and repetition, the cadences of "there was evening and there was morning," and of "and God saw that it was good" and the finality of "and God saw that it was very good" helped them reestablish calm in their souls and remember the order of God's orchestrated creative action in the world, which brought assurance to their spirits.

This is, perhaps, a new and different way to thinking about these opening verses in the bible—to see the creation account as Israel’s intentional first step back in order that they could still, in the midst of the darkness and despair of exile, move forward with courage and with hope.

In the midst of all that they had been through, exiled from home, with the loss of the Temple, the loss of their land, the loss of the old ways of worshipping, Israel’s poets set down an account of the creation of the entire universe. Using with poetry and repetition, the sure and certain cadences of the verses, helped them look up and out—beyond the challenging circumstances of the moment and the devastation that they had been through. Then, they could remember God as Creator of the entire universe—every living thing on earth, including them, but oh so much more than them.

When tempted to get stuck in the hardness, to get beat down and unable to rise from all the changes that came with living life as exiles, the creation story helped them look up and out. Again, why? So that they might recall that God is the one who creates and blesses. The narrative of creation is moving continually towards completion as God pronounces blessings three times: over all living creatures, over human beings, and over the Sabbath.

Feeling lost in a strange new land, caught beneath the suffocating powers of nations and empires, Israel’s creation narrative draws God’s people to look up and out: to see the universe, and all life within it, as fundamentally a blessing, fundamentally good, and created to flourish. The message in the story is not that this goodness prevents hardship and difficulties, but rather that we can draw strength from God’s wild creativity, sovereign power, and pure universal and extravagant benevolence in the midst of fears and trials.

There is one more particularly relevant detail from this beautiful creation story for us here at Westminster. As we all know, the story recounts how human beings are made, each one of us, all genders, in the image of God. We are made, in other words, in the image of the creative and imaginative and benevolent God. And so, when we come together as a community for an event like Ice Cream on Us, each of us giving a little, a little money, a little time, a little creativity, a little laughter, a little openness, and a lotta cookies, we together are bearing the image of the creative, imaginative and benevolent God. We are bearing it in and for the world, the world that God created and loves and is holding at all times. We are bearing that image of God in a time when all of us, church and unchurch, members, non-members, and friends, locals and visitors, neighbors and out-of-towners, all alike have been wandering through our own modern day exile—an exile brought about by a global pandemic, an exile filled with darkness

and chaos. As we bear that the image of the God who is creative, whose intention is to bless, and who brings goodness to all, we allow God's Spirit to do work in us and everyone we encounter that we might all together look up and look out—to find calm for our souls and reassurance for our spirits. And that, as the McClafferty family said, is a blessing of goodness. Thanks be to God. Amen.