

**WESTMINSTER**  
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SERMON

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# You Belong

Dr. Jo Forrest



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Howard Thurman once wrote: “There are two questions that (we) must ask ourselves. The first is ‘Where am I going?’ and the second is ‘Who will go with me?’” He also claims that “if you ever get these questions in the wrong order, you are in trouble.”

Another wisdom saying reinforces it: If you don’t know where you are going, you can be led astray by all sorts of people.

This fall we will read some of the iconic stories of the Old Testament that shape our faith and are shared among the monotheistic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However obtuse or too ancient these stories may initially sound, they tell of flesh and blood people who struggle with the same urges, physical needs, and ultimate desires as you and me. These stories convey an eternal truth of what it means to be made in the image of God that transcends any particular time or place.

We begin at the beginning, in the Book of Genesis. Even though it is the first book of the Old Testament, scholars widely agree that it is not the oldest nor the only story of creation in our Bibles.

It was composed by the Israelites who’d waged a battle with a fierce army, watched family members be slaughtered or sold,

lost their homes, and in their grief, they wondered how to make sense of God's claim on their lives.

While exiled in Babylon, torn away from the order of the Temple, land, and worship that gave structure, the writers found hope in the created order of sunrise and sunset, days and years, fish and fowl.

Even though a war created by humankind had destroyed, they saw the goodness God breathed into an ordered world with a cycle of renewal that inherently creates goodness that no foreign captivity or king could erase.

The ancient authors wrote the first chapter of Genesis with rhythm and predictability to reflect this orderly world in ways that soothed. For the sake of time, I edited the reading to highlight the poetic style, for you to hear the order, the repetition, almost as if a liturgy, and feel the comfort.

*Dear God, We may not be in exile in foreign lands, but we wander and wonder about you and our lives. Settle us into this ancient story. Sooth us with your enduring presence and promises that we feel held by you and destined for you. Amen.*

### **Genesis 1 selected verses**

When God began to create the heavens and the earth,  
<sup>2</sup>the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered

the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

<sup>3</sup>Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

<sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.

<sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

<sup>6</sup>And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ...And it was so. <sup>8</sup>God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

<sup>9</sup>And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so...And God saw that it was good.

<sup>11</sup>Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation” And it was so. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

<sup>14</sup>And God said,

“Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years. And it was so.

And God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

<sup>20</sup> And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." And God saw that it was good.

<sup>23</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

<sup>24</sup> And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind:" And it was so. And God saw that it was good.

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, <sup>27</sup> So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female God created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply." And it was so.

<sup>31</sup> God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

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We are all essentially thrown into a world that has turned long before each of us and will continue to evolve long after we

return to the dust. Into this grand narrative, our stories are written. With the intellect and imagination God gives us, we discern the purpose of our lives. Each of us needs to figure that out for ourselves. And we need to understand who shares this goal.

One culture from the Ancient Near Eastern taught that the earth began from a violent conflict between sea monsters. Our faith ancestors rejected this fable but still tucked away a version of Leviathan in scriptures. (I enjoy the folly, the sense of humor reading this in the Psalms.)

Another Ancient Near Eastern story claims that the king was god-like. He ruled over others and controlled blessings. That notion implies, some people were destined for privilege were only they received a divine image. (Makes us wonder if the king dictated the narrative, or the ancient authors harbored some subversive motive to appease him.) Our faith ancestors also reject this understanding – neither a Babylonian nor an Israelite king spoke for God nor mediated God's desires.

In the wasteland of exile, our faith ancestors woke up to a new day, aware of their collective possibility because of the diversity embedded by God in the people. No one is born with the right to control or dominate others since all reflect some fraction of God's divine image.

Lastly, other authors revealed the limits of their culture's imagination or their nationalistic pride with a story of creation focused on just one civilization. For example, the Babylonian story ends with Babylonia. Our story imagines the magnitude of the cosmos, and not merely the land of Israel.

The story given to us in Genesis tells us where we come from – God. It tells us who goes with us – the rest of humankind who also bear God's image.<sup>1</sup>

And it launches the grand story of faith that catches us in every phase of life, every aspect from doubt and belief, to keep us moving towards the goal. And our goal is to return at the end of our days and say to God, "here is what I did with this gift of life."

Genesis expresses God's invitation to belong to God. The word *belonging* encompasses our human *longings*.

Even though we are thrown into this creation, God gives us the autonomy to claim our belonging. We long for a place on earth to feel at home and become rooted from the kinship with the oak trees and the deer that dot our neighborhoods. We make it happen – as a mother or father, daughter or son, through a life's work, and this community.

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<sup>1</sup> Shai Held, "In Genesis 1, we're all royalty," *The Christian Century*, November 7, 2018

When failure sets in or loss occurs, the constancy of each day and season renews our sense of belonging when we feel the strength from a divine force far beyond our imagination.

Belonging is a two-way embrace. It begins the moment someplace or someone says to you “welcome” and you receive the gift. You set your heart down inside the door, knowing that you are more than welcome, you are wanted and valued for who you are.

Then belonging requires our participation. It requires us to unpack our bags and discard everything we were carrying that we no longer need to fully embrace where we are and who we are.

How we come to discover our purpose – our destiny – and how we develop a sense of belonging differs for each of us.

I want to share with you an obituary I’d saved for years. Even though I never knew this man, his home – Iowa – tugged at my heart and his story broke it open. This was published in the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*.

Ken Fuson, born June 23, 1956, died Jan. 3, 2020, is stunned to learn that the world is somehow able to go on without him. Ken grew up in Granger, Iowa and decided when he was a sophomore that he wanted to be a newspaper reporter. In

high school he covered sports before leaving for the University of Missouri-Columbia where he attended the university's famous School of Journalism, which is a clever way of saying, "almost graduated but didn't." Facing a choice between covering a story for the *Daily Tribune* or taking his final exams, Ken went for the story. He never claimed to be smart, just committed.

Later, Ken landed his dream job in Des Moines, working as a reporter where he was probably best known for writing a one-paragraph, one-sentence weather story that has been reprinted in four books. Then Ken took the principled stand of leaving Iowa because *The Sun* in Baltimore offered him more money. In his newspaper work, Ken won several national feature-writing awards.

Three years later, having blown most of that money at Pimlico Race Track, he returned to Iowa. For most of his life, Ken suffered from a compulsive gambling addiction that nearly destroyed him.

But his church friends, and the loving people at Gamblers Anonymous, never gave up on him. Ken last placed a bet on Sept. 5, 2009. He died clean. He hopes that anyone who needs help will seek it, which is hard, and accept it, which is even harder.

Miracles abound. And, Ken's pastor says God can work miracles for you and through you. Skepticism may be cool, and for too many years Ken embraced it, but it was faith in Jesus Christ that transformed his life. That was the one thing he never regretted. It changed everything.

For many years Ken was a member of the First United Methodist Church and sang in the choir, which was a neat trick considering he couldn't read a note of music. The choir members will never know how much they helped him. He felt as though he belonged to them, in the church, and he belonged to God. If you want to know what God's love feels like, just walk in those doors. Seriously, right now. We'll wait. Ken's not going anywhere.

Ken had many character flaws - if he still owes you money, he's sorry, sincerely - but he liked to think that he had a good sense of humor and a deep compassion for others. He prided himself on letting other drivers cut in line.

Don't send flowers to the funeral. Instead, Ken asks that everyone donate a book to a public library. Yes, this obituary is probably too long. Ken always wrote too long. God is good. Embrace every moment, even the bad ones. See you in heaven. Ken promises to let you cut in line. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Published on [www.desmoinesregister.com](http://www.desmoinesregister.com) from Jan. 8 to Jan. 9, 2020.

By my calculation, Ken's life spanned over 23,000 evenings and mornings. Those days gave him the sense of renewal. Ken witnessed God's creation unfold in 256 seasons of fall, winter, spring, and summer. The seasons can be brutal in Iowa. A fall harvest teaches us that God brings the best, even from the cold death of winter.

Despite his wanderings, by the repetition of God's created order, Ken grew to understand the goodness God destined for him when he directed his life towards God, by belonging in the community of faith. By belonging to God through Christ, Ken was promised that his final sunset would turn into a sunrise into an eternal realm.

It's one thing to live day to day. But it's another thing entirely to belong to a time and place, a people, and to God.

And our belongings as a people of God in this community shape what's possible for us to thrive as individuals and in our home. It helps us shape this community and most of all transform a world that desperately needs God's goodness.





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