

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Made to Flourish

Genesis 1:24-31

In last Sunday's sermon, I spoke about the level of uncertainty that we experience in our lives, and how the gospel—the death and resurrection of Jesus—gives us solid ground on which to stand, so that we can be a sign of hope in the world. Interestingly, one of the ways that uncertainty may be shaping people's outlook and choices is in the decision about having children. Here in the United States, birth rates have been declining for nearly two decades. Other wealthy countries have been experiencing the same. Governments around the world have been exploring various solutions to reverse the trend, including offering financial support to parents. The Trump Administration has been looking at the possibility of offering a \$5,000 "baby bonus" to every American mother after she gives birth.

While these are interesting possibilities, some have raised questions about whether it will take something deeper to incentivize people to have babies, a need that governments can't meet. As one journalist wrote:

That need is for meaning. In trying to solve the fertility puzzle, thinkers have cited people's concerns over finances, climate change, political instability, or even potential war. But in listening closely to people's stories, I've detected a broader thread of uncertainty—about the value of life and a reason for being. Many in the current generation of young adults don't seem totally convinced of their own purpose or the purpose of humanity at large, let alone that of a child. It may be that for many people, absent a clear sense of meaning, the perceived challenges of having children outweigh any subsidy the government might offer.¹

No matter what ways the government says, "Be fruitful and multiply," there are limits to how much our elected officials can motivate us to populate the earth. It takes something more. It takes cultivating a culture where children are seen and welcomed, and where households become a space of well-being and flourishing, for all generations under that roof.

Here in the household of God, we worship and serve the One who first said, "Let there be." In today's text from Genesis, God enters day six of his creative work. Having already made things that swim and swarm and fly, God starts the next day with the land animals, creatures that walk and crawl and creep along the earth. As with everything he has made so far, God looks at it and pronounces it good. Then God starts work on us. "Let us make mankind in our image" (v. 26).

This "let us" language has always been a challenge to interpret. Who's this "us"? Some say it could be God in conversation with other divine beings in a heavenly court, or God and the angels. Or it could be God deliberating inwardly with himself. Or it could be a way of reflecting and providing a glimpse of the Trinity, showing us that God's very being is always communal.

Whatever conclusions you and I draw about "let us," what's more important is that we humans are made in the "image of God," another phrase that has generated lots of different

opinions. The bottom line is that while we human beings don't get a day of our own, but share day six with the land animals, we're made different. We humans are made with a unique place and role in the world that God is forming. "Image of God" has mainly to do with our God-given responsibility to share in his dominion over the world.

It's not as if God has all the power and we humans are completely powerless. In the very act of creating, God makes room for us and gives us a certain independence and freedom, space to participate in his governance of his creation. True, this comes with risk, the risk that we human beings will misuse the power entrusted to us, which does happen as the story unfolds. But at this point in Genesis, divine creativity doesn't exclude human creativity. Instead, it makes human creativity possible. As Andy Crouch summarizes it, we're "not just deputies or functionaries in a heavenly bureaucracy of command and control, but agents of creativity in a universe designed to create more and more power."²

One of the ways we exercise our God-given power is by procreating. In our text, as soon as God makes humankind, with both male and female imaging the divine, God's blessing includes the command, "Be fruitful and multiply." In other words, fill, order, and steward the beauty of creation, including producing little males and females, who will also mirror God to the world. While in one sense God alone has the power to give life, God involves us in bringing life into existence.

Mother's Day is a good opportunity to remember and reflect on the blessedness of motherhood within God's great and good purposes for the world. Author and preacher Tony Campolo said that when his wife, Peggy, was at home fulltime with their children and someone would ask, "And what is it that you do, my dear?" she would respond, "I am socializing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation." Then she would ask the other person, "And what do you do?"³

That may sound like a very thick and theologically fancy description of a mother's work. Most days you might be satisfied just to get your kids up, fed, dressed, taught (in home or at school), entertained, bathed, in bed, safe and sound for another day, maybe even with a few moments to care for yourself or spend time with your spouse. You may not have thought as much about how all this fits into God's grand plan for redeeming the cosmos. But whether your children are still in diapers or out on their own, today's text reminds us that we live in God's world, and that being fruitful and multiplying is a lifelong vocation of bringing a child into this world and helping that child flourish for the glory of God and the redemption of humankind.

In 1997, Fred Rogers, creator of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," won the Emmy lifetime achievement award. During his acceptance speech, he said:

So many people have helped me to come to this night. Some of you are here. Some are far away. Some are even in heaven. All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, 10 seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are? Those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life. 10 seconds of silence. I'll watch the time.

Whoever you've been thinking about, how pleased they must be to know the difference you feel they've made.⁴

I like that expression, "loved us into being." It captures the role that mothers, and fathers, and many other individuals, have played and continue to play in bringing you into existence.

The creation of you, while it begins in the womb, extends beyond birth and into all the years of your life, right up to the present and into the future. Every day, you are being made by our Creator, with the help of many human participants. They're involved in shaping you and forming you.

God's will is that we help form one another in the direction of flourishing. After all, the story we hear in Genesis, the story of how it all began, is a story of how God uses his power to create and shape an environment where creatures, including we human image bearers, can flourish and thrive. God doesn't just intend that there be life, but that there be life in abundance. He doesn't command that there be a little bit of life here and a little there. He doesn't command a couple of cows here, a few robins there, a deer or two here, a smallmouth bass there. No, God commands that there be teeming, fruitful, multiplying abundance. And within this story, we humans are meant to flourish.

Researchers recently published the results of the first Global Flourishing Study (GFS). This was a five-year study of over 200,000 adults across 22 countries, representing more than 40% of the world's population. Flourishing wasn't just measured by financial or material prosperity, though those were certainly taken into account, but also by happiness, physical and mental health, character development, close relationships and community, as well as a sense of meaning and purpose. According to the researchers, "one of the most striking findings from the first wave of the GFS is the strong association between religious identity and flourishing." They even state, "As Christians who are also researchers, we are heartened by the evidence that church attendance offers most people not only the hope of salvation but also a more 'abundant' life (John 10:10)—a life of meaning, friendships, and virtue—now."⁵

"Abundant life." That's what Jesus says he came to bring. And he says that in the context of John's Gospel, which opens with "In the beginning was the Word" (1:1). "In the beginning." "Let there be." "Let us make." "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (v. 31). The goodness of life, given by God, is something that we're responsible for sharing and cultivating in our life together as a congregation. No one knows better than a mother how much it means to see your child grow, flourish, and exercise their potential. This itself is a reflection of the fact that in the family of God, we're here to help each other flourish, to help one another fulfill the calling that each of us has to participate in God's work of dominion in the world.

Being part of this congregation means that you're part of a community of image bearers where we enable one another to do our parts in God's creative work. We're certainly not perfect representations of the image of God. As the story in Genesis unfolds, we see that the first humans disobeyed God and failed in their vocation as image bearers, and all of us were included in their sin. But God sent Jesus, the one who is the complete image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), so that we could be forgiven and God's image restored in us. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God has acted to recreate us, to reshape us, into Christ's perfect, image-bearing relationship with God. For those who are in Christ, God has already determined who and what we will be. We are, as Paul says, "predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Rom. 8:29). In other words, we're made to flourish. We're made to enable and help one another to flourish, to the glory of God our Creator.

¹ Christine Emba, "The Real Reason People Aren't Having Kids." *The Atlantic* (August 1, 2024).

² Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013) n.p.

³ John Ortberg and Ruth Haley, *An Ordinary day with Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 122.

⁴ "Fred Rogers' unforgettable Emmy Award speech—1997. YouTube (June 7, 2014).

⁵ Brendan Case, Katelyn N. G. Long, Byron R. Johnson, and Tyler J. Vanderweele. "Measuring the Good Life" *Christianity Today* (May/June 2025) 86, 89.