

SERMON TITLE: "Starting the New Year Well: Creatively"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 1:1-5, 14-19, 26-28; and 2:1-3
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 29, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Wasn't it beautiful on Friday morning? With a much-needed reprieve from snow removal, we were able to take the time to appreciate that the sky was blue, the sun was shining, the mountains were covered in white snow, and there was all that thick, gorgeous frost on the tree branches. God the artist was definitely at work creating a spectacular scene.

Ever since January 1st, I've been preaching a sermon series called "Starting the New Year Well." So far, we've started the New Year well mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Over the next few weeks, we will continue this series, starting the New Year well societally, relationally, and financially. Today, though, I invite you to consider the story of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, so we can learn from God about starting the New Year well creatively.

1—CLAIM PERMISSION TO BE CREATIVE

Maybe the first place we could begin with this story of creation is to recognize that to be well creatively, we need to claim permission to be creative. That was easy for God to do, since God was the first being. There was no higher authority, cause, or purpose. There was nothing that could hold God back. There was no one who could criticize God for playing too much or wasting time and resources in frivolous pursuits. There was no one who could fault God for making unstable rock formations that would later break apart. And it was OK if God's creative processes took thousands and millions and billions of years because there was no one competing to do it faster. God had wonderful permission to be creative.

Just like God, to be well creatively, we need to claim permission to be creative. Granted, we aren't the sole authority, but as Genesis 1:27 tells us, God created us in the divine image. So, if God has the right and authority to be creative, then so do we. God created us to build and sew, to paint and cook.

We were designed to draw and saw, to plant and grow. We were given the ability to dream and compose, to sing and dance. We were given minds and hands to engineer and tinker, to design and decorate. As Jeremiah the prophet said, God is the potter and we are the clay. But, in God's image, we too are potters who form and shape the world around us in beautiful, interactive, and creative ways.

We need to claim this God-given permission for ourselves and each other. Instead of being our own worst critics, we need to allow ourselves and others to play and experiment without high expectation of super quality work. If God could create dinosaurs that weren't able to survive the test of time, then it seems reasonable that our works of art and creativity might not have to be classics for all time either. If it's OK that God made weird creatures like a platypus that looks like it's half beaver and half duck, then we can probably claim permission to make some weird stuff too. And, it's OK if some of our creations are such failures that they never see the light of day. Some of God's strangest creations live so deep down in the dark ocean that scientists are only now discovering them.

When we claim permission to be creative, then we won't be afraid of failure, and we'll be a lot more likely to try and do new things. In a book called *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, I read the question, "If I didn't have to do it perfectly, what would I try?" Let me repeat that so you have time to consider an answer. "If I didn't have to do it perfectly, what would I try?"* If we want to be well creatively, we have to claim permission to be creative.

2—MAKE SPACE TO BE CREATIVE

God had another advantage that informs our creativity. If we really want to start the New Year well creatively, then we need to make space to be creative. In God's case, in the beginning of all things, there was plenty of space. In fact, that's really all there was—a formless void of darkness that covered the face of the deep. It was kind of a like a blank canvas or an unhewn piece of wood or stone. It was like an empty cooking pan, awaiting the ingredients imaginatively selected by the chef.

But God's space to be creative wasn't only about an unformed art substance. It was also a space with no distractions. In the very beginning, there was nothing else for God to do. There was nothing else that demanded God's attention. There not only were no creatures in crisis or people a prayin', there were no books, radios, or televisions. There were no phones, movies, or classroom lectures. There was no input. Thus the only possibility was for creative output.

In order for us to make space to be creative, we might need to consider ways to shut off some of the input that distracts us. Is it possible to clear out some unnecessary clutter and make a creative space in a room of our house or a corner of our garage? Is it possible to shut out the distracting noise of media and people? Is it possible to clear our calendars of some unimportant activities and maybe even some important but not-yet urgent tasks?

I have a neighbor lady who is in her early 90s. Mildred is a painter, but she has told me many times that she just can't seem to paint like she used to. Last week, Mildred said maybe she needs to go in her painting room and just throw everything away and start fresh. Maybe then she could paint better. Maybe she could. Maybe after living in that house for 60 years, she just has so many painting supplies and former artworks piled up in her art room that she doesn't have any space to be creative anymore. It's hard to imagine any reason to be creative if our space is cramped. Remember that old saying that "necessity is the mother of invention"? We have to give our creativity room to blossom. To be well creatively, we need to make space to be creative.

3—PRACTICE CREATIVITY REGULARLY

There's a third lesson we can learn from God's original act of creation. To start the New Year well creatively, we need to practice creativity regularly. In Genesis one, we see that God created every day for six straight days, and then rested on one day. I think many of us confine our creativity to the opposite schedule. We force our creative impulses to lie dormant six days per week, and then only let them out to play one day per week—if that.

Do you see how backwards that is? Now, I know, of course, many of us still have to earn a living. Retired people or children might be able to play on weekdays, but somebody has to go to work and bring home the bacon. And to get that bacon, someone has to go to the grocery store. And then someone has to cook it in a hurry, which isn't always that creative or fun, because that same someone has also had to drive kids to dance lessons or soccer practice or to an orthodontist appointment, and once at home still has to help kids with homework, wash dishes, pay bills, do laundry, care for the dog, and spend quality time with their spouse. Where is there any time for imagination and creativity in that?!

Right. I get it. I'm one of those working, family people too. So I'm preaching this sermon to myself, as well as to you. But, no matter how hard it is, we must play and be creative regularly—or we'll go nuts. We'll blow a gasket. Remember, we have been created by God in God's creative image. That's what we're designed to do. So, somehow, we have to do it to be well.

Fortunately, many of us have the kind of jobs that allow us to be creative. That's one of the aspects of being a pastor that I really love. Designing a worship service and preparing a sermon every week is a mandatory task, but it's also a wonderful creative opportunity for me. Every single week is a new blank slate waiting to be filled in with songs, prayers, scriptures, and relevant life applications. I get to read and think and listen and pray my way toward a Sunday morning creation that I hope is meaningful to you.

That's me. I hope your job or daily activities give you a similar kind of room to play and create. If they don't, then you may need to find an outlet for creativity in some kind of regular hobbies or look for a different job. My philosophy is that, to be sustainable, our daily activities have to produce joy in our lives. If we're spending too much time doing things that feel constricting or burdensome, we'll soon be burned out and resentful. That can happen even with activities that once seemed creatively fun and joyful, but now feel like an expectation or requirement. That's why we sometimes need to change things up. Get out of a rut. Give something up and try something new. If being alone isn't helping you create, then get

together with some different people who might stimulate different thoughts and creative impulses. Become a student instead of a teacher, or become a leader instead of a follower. When you drive to your next doctor appointment, take a different route and see a new neighborhood. Watch a different kind of movie or read a different kind of book. This need for creative fun is not frivolous. It's not something we can ignore or keep pushing away. Some kind of frequent meaningful creativity is a necessity for our spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. God created six days in a row and rested one. Starting the New Year well involves practicing creativity regularly.

CONCLUSION

I began this sermon mentioning how beautiful God's creation was on Friday morning with the blue sky, sunshine, snow-covered mountains, and frost-covered trees. At the end of the day Friday, when I got up from my desk to go home around 5:30, I noticed that the mountains had turned a lovely shade of pink. There was God, at it again, colorfully playing with the divine artist's palette.

Our creator God has made us to be creative. Many of you already practice this aspect of health and wellness. So I asked some of you arts-and-crafts people to bring a sample of your handiwork. Thank you to all of you who did and put it on display in the northwest corner of the sanctuary. I hope that the rest of you will go over there after worship and take a look—not just to admire the *talent* of these people, but also to recognize their *regular practice of creative wellness*. My goal is that this will be an inspiration for all of us to claim our own permission to be creative, to make space to be creative, and to practice creativity regularly. These are definitely good ways of starting the New Year well--creatively.

*A paraphrase from Julia Cameron, (Penguin Hudson: New York, 1992 & 2002), p. 122. This author and book inspired a number of my ideas in this sermon.