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**SERMON STARTER**

We are all familiar with the ‘big story’ of the Bible of a world called forth by our Creator God who “… *saw all that he had made, and it was very good”* (Genesis 1:31). We know that the prideful overreaching of Adam and Eve, their desire to be like the One whose divine image they bore, their disobedience to what God had commanded them, brought pain and suffering and death into God’s ‘very good’ creation and opened up a gulf between a holy and perfect God and a sinful and selfish people. We know that after these events in the early chapters of Genesis, the Bible tells of God’s desire to restore his people to relationship with him, to call out, for his glory, a people who will share again something of his holiness and who will, by the worship of their daily living, be a light to those around them, pointing them to the Sovereign Lord of all. And we know that this renewed relationship is ultimately made possible by the gracious gift of God’s Son, the Lord Jesus, through whom, by faith and the work of the Spirit, we can be called ‘children of God’.

It is as those whose stories have become interwoven with God’s big story, as those who are called out to tell the story of Christ’s work of reconciliation on the cross, that we work out what it means to live into the fullness of our identity as sons and daughters of the living God: the God who cares about justice and equity and righteousness; the God who has a heart for the marginalised and the oppressed; the God who gave so generously to restore us to relationship with him; the God who has promised to, one day, redeem and restore his whole creation.

The story of that creation stands, for us, in the tension between the now and the ‘not yet’. It stands in that place where we know that one day all things will be made new in and through Christ and the vision of a passage like Isaiah 65: 17-25 will no longer be just a vision… and yet as we look around us, as we listen to the stories of those like Fabiola, we are acutely aware of how far this world is from the ‘goodness’ with which the story began. For our stories, and the stories of the women who pass through Casa Noeli, are lived in a world of injustice and inequality, where socio-economic and personal relationships are far from what the loving and holy and just Creator God intended.

As disciples of Jesus, as new creations in him, we are also agents of the new creation and partners in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation in this ongoing story and we must hear anew Jesus’ call to follow him into a new way of being in the world and into a new way of listening to and responding to the stories of others. For in the gospels we encounter many stories that speak of Jesus as a man who steps outside the conventions of culture, who affords value and dignity to men and women and children who find themselves on the margins, who constantly points to what redeemed and redeeming humanity might look like, who calls us away from the narrative constructs of society and tradition in respect of gender to the metanarrative of humankind, male and female, created in the image of God, sharing a deep and essential unity, being from the same source, and possessing a deep-rooted equality of dignity and worth.

Our stories should, surely, not simply be stories of our personal redemption. Rather, the knowledge that our story is now part of a story that is more expansive, more far-reaching, more transformative than our earth-bound intellects can ever fully grasp should inspire us to begin ‘pulling back’ the story of the world around us to the place where we know it will ultimately come to a conclusion, to where, in one sense, it began. And as we seek to do so, we can also share the stories of those things that would hold us back, that would tell us we cannot gain ground, that would oppose the divine metanarrative, and in so doing find the strength, from one another, to hold on to that redeemed vision and to invite the Spirit to pull our lives towards it and the work of ushering it in.

The 2018 World Development Appeal shares a story that challenges us to hope and pray and work for a world in which relationships between men and women are not founded on control or coercion, where violence is no longer endemic as a characteristic of gendered relations, and gender is not any more the most significant determinant of poverty in our world. It invites us to challenge the narrative that our being male and female can be a source of oppression and injustice, to receive it instead as foundationally part of God’s creation and to embrace it as a source of joy, gloriously open to the redemption of God, along with every other square inch of our lives and the whole domain of our human existence. It calls us back to a place of thankfulness for our redemptive story and also to a place of realisation that this story is not, in fact, ours but God’s, and that we are partners with him in telling the story on and in enabling others to be part of it by re-creating and renewing cultures and structures and relationships within which people are able to flourish (along with the rest of creation) in the harmonious state in which they were created. This is to be in Jesus’ way, in the Father’s will, in the story of his kingdom come and coming.

**Suggested Scripture readings**

Genesis 1:26 – 2:1

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Luke 13: 20-21

Colossians 1: 15-20

**Suggested Hymns**

IPH 223 ‘O Lord our God, how Majestic is Your Name’

IPH 249 ‘Father God in Heaven, Lord most High’

IPH 590 ‘Fold to Your Heart Your Sister and Your Brother’

IPH 611 ‘The Kingdom of God is Justice and Joy’

IPH 617 ‘For the Healing of the Nations’