

***Get After It! Pt. 1,
Made for Work***
Genesis 2: 15; Ephesians 2: 10; Exodus 31: 1-11

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**May 5, AD 2019
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

Did you have to take those career aptitude tests in high school? They're supposed to tell you what you might be good at doing in the world that would actually pay you money. They didn't have the category for the career that actually suits my skill set: a medieval wandering bard. That's the guy who can't actually do anything practical. But he can watch you doing practical things, and then write you a poem about it. I admire people who can do woodwork or surgery, grow flowers or create a spreadsheet, paint within lines or fix a leaky faucet. My contribution in those areas is limited to telling you cool things about what it means to be a gardener, surgeon, accountant, or craftsman. Astoundingly, I am still employed! So I wanted over a couple of sermons to encourage you about the meaning and value of the work you do. For me, that's a bit of job security. Hopefully for you this will be energizing as you do all there is that you have to do day by day.

Our text from Genesis today reminds us that humanity was created to work. In fact, work was the fulfilling joy of living in Eden. This is very different from the idea that Paradise is lying around in togas with servants bringing you drinks that have little umbrellas in them. It's very different than the cultures which viewed manual labor as beneath people of dignity. Or religions that considered humanity to be merely the slaves of the gods. Rather we were created to participate with God in shaping the creation. True participation through work by human beings would increase Eden's delight. Beauty would be made more beautiful by our work.

Our passage says, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). To work it and to keep it. These are loaded words that grow through the pages of Scripture in significance. The word for working the Garden will come also to mean our worship of the living God. Worship is a form of work. In worship we participate in meeting our Creator and relating to him. But the other side of the coin is also true: work is a form of worship. Not worship of the earth. But worship of the Creator. God put the man in

the Garden to work it: to worship the Maker by serving and tending the creation given to him.

The man's work in the Garden is very similar to the motto on the side of police cars: to protect and to serve. For that second word, keep, means to keep safe, to keep flourishing, to keep in healthy, growing relationship. It's the same word we hear every week in our benediction when we ask God to "bless you and keep you." So it's as if God said, "Here you go, Adam. Everything is growing. Shape it. Add your creativity and your effort. Make it more beautiful. Make it more bountiful so there's always more than enough. Care for it. Serve me by serving this project called earth. You are put here to work. Work means worshipping me by the faithful, creative, effort you put into the creation I gave you. And then every evening we can meet in the Garden and talk about what you did. This is a very high view of work: we participate with God in shaping, ruling and caring for the world he made.

Our passage from Exodus this morning shows how the glorious variety of talents and skills can work together to glorify God and create flourishing communities. The context is that God's people had just been delivered out of 400 years of slavery in Egypt. They were heading for the Promised Land. On the mountain, the LORD spoke to Moses his commandments that would shaped the identity of his people. The foundational rules we know as the ten commandments. Then God revealed a number of commands for working out their life together, including how to build the center of his worship. They were to create a tabernacle for worship that had to be made from their very finest craftsmanship.

As we look closely at this passage, we see how the LORD called one man, Bezalel to be the leader of this project. "I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship" (Ex. 31: 3). We see a wonderful combination of Bezalel's spiritual connection to God's vision and the "natural" abilities God gave him. These abilities were developed through study and practice. Bezalel had the Spirit of God so he knew the big picture, the point of why he was gifted for this work. And he had the smarts and skills to get it done. Bezalel, though, wasn't called to do this work alone. He was called to be a visionary leader who would direct and teach others. God went on, "And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you" (31:6).

When we read back through the story, we see an astounding range of skills needed. Management skills had to coordinate the efforts. Math skills were needed

for measurements. Chemistry was needed to create the special oils and incense. Brute strength was needed to hew the rock and fell the trees. Tool makers and tool wielders were required. Designers. Sewers. Metal workers. Utensil makers and fabric weavers. Priests to conduct the worship once it was made. Janitors and finishers. People to plan, execute and maintain the holy place of the God who had saved them. Worshipers to attend, pray, sacrifice and glorify God. Everyone participated.

None of these skills dropped into people's laps. They had to be taught by experts to others. Honed by practice. Advanced through innovation. Study. Observation. Trial and error and success. Diligence. Perseverance. Showing up day in and day out. Sweat and thought. Everyone contributing. And each working for the shared vision and the common good. Israel was a microcosm of God's world reaching plan to create a humanity teeming with participating and fruitfulness.

In our prayers at church, we often pray for our seminary students and our missionaries, for our ministry partners around town and the pastors of neighboring churches. I think it's vital that we see our interconnectedness. I think we have to be looking outwards and expanding our reach. But we also do something every week that undergirds it all. We pray for people doing particular kinds of work. We don't always get to it in the pastoral prayers, but it's always on the prayer sheet. I want us to pray in a way that shows how these kinds of work participate in God's larger vision of the world working in harmony and goodness. For instance, when we pray for people in financial services, we don't just want to pray, "Lord help them to be honest with other people's money." We want to pray, "Lord, money is the means of exchange that makes possible all the transaction so we can trade our work for the things we need. Bless those who handle these means of exchange. Guide them as they make loans to help businesses grow or families buy homes. Give them wisdom as they turn investments into secure retirements, and thank you for such skill."

We want to be able to do that for teachers, homemakers, artists, legal professionals, landscapers, students, psychiatrists and pipe-fitters. Everyone who exerts effort to maintain or advance wholeness and health and productivity in the world. It takes all of us. And it all counts. I want each and all of us to be able to realize how our work partakes of a larger whole. If it is honest, wholesome, and legal, your work glorifies God. We can relax into that. We can rejoice into the labor we have to do anyway. For we can know how it all contributes. If you can't figure out how the effort you put out to maintain your life connects to God's larger purposes, contact me. It's why you have a wandering bard for a pastor. I can't do a

whole lot that is practical, but I believe I can help you see the meaning in what you do.

Let's round towards home by looking at one more example. Many of you knew Pastor Donald Tabb, founder of the Chapel on the Campus and, in so many ways, a pastor to our entire city. His widow, Mary, attended one of our Lenten groups. On the last night, she handed me a book called *The Strength You Need* by Robert Morgan. It's about 12 great strength passages in the Bible. Mary said it's the last book Don had read before his tragic boating accident. He liked it so much that he asked her to order copies and give them to others. Mary has been honoring her husband's wishes and I was touched that she gave one to me. It's a great book and I wanted to share one of Morgan's insights that relates to our topic today.

In chapter 4, Morgan highlights the beloved line from Psalm 46: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble. I've loved that verse for a long time, and used it often in funerals. But I had never realized the historical context of that wonderful psalm. It dates back to the days of Hezekiah, one of the most faithful and able of the kings of Jerusalem. Midway through his long reign, Hezekiah faced a serious national threat. About 700 BC, the Assyrians were on the move. Their king, Sennacherib, was gobbling up nations with one of fiercest armies ever assembled. Sennacherib came to Jerusalem and surrounded it. His plan was to starve the city in a protracted siege before marching against its walls.

Jerusalem was in a perilous position. The city's water supply came from outside of the city walls. Jerusalem itself had no river flowing through it. It had no lake. The people depended for water entirely on the Gihon Spring east of the walls. Water from the Gihon Spring was carried by aqueduct into the city where it filled the reservoir known as the Pool of Siloam. This system meant that an army as powerful as Sennacherib's could easily destroy the aqueduct, cutting off water to the city even as they enjoyed the water from the spring themselves.

Facing this reality, Hezekiah undertook a daring and desperate engineering project. 2 Chronicles 32:30 tells us that Hezekiah "closed the upper outlet of the waters of Gihon and directed them down to the west side of the City of David." So easily said in one sentence. So astounding in the reality. Hezekiah devised a way to close off access to the spring waters at their source. He directed them downwards into the ground. But they were not wasted. For Hezekiah created a tunnel deep underground to catch the waters and send them towards the city. The tunnel went under the great walls of Jerusalem and emptied into the reservoir inside. With their

water supply safe, the people survived the siege. God delivered his people and Sennacherib went back to Assyria humiliated.

Hezekiah's Tunnel was rediscovered in 1838. Not too many years ago, it was opened up to the public. Our own Sherry McKinley walked through it last month. When you see it, you realize what a marvel this tunnel is. It's a miracle that it could be successfully created in time to save the city. But the tunnel didn't just appear. It's the result of every kind of person working full out for the common good. This tunnel is 1750 feet long, two feet wide. Water still flows through it. It was cut through solid rock. With picks, by hand. You can still see the pick marks on the stone. With such need of haste, they worked from both directions. The miracle, of course, is that they managed to meet and connect the tunnel in time. An ancient plaque at the meeting place was also discovered. Imagine all it took to make this happen. Design. Engineering. Brute force. People hauling out the rock that was cut. People supplying the workers with food and medical care. Managers rotating the work force. Every person who was able contributed to the whole. Work creates life, and the people participated in God's deliverance of the city.

Now here's the kicker. I'd never seen this before. Psalm 46 commemorates the LORD's deliverance of his city. It reminds us that God is our refuge and our strength, our very present help in times of trouble. Then, in the middle of the Psalm, we read, "There is a river, whose streams make glad the city of God... God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved." This is a psalm about Jerusalem. And a river that flows through the holy city. Except there is no river in Jerusalem. No lake. No Stream. There is only Hezekiah's Tunnel and the stream that flows under the walls from the Gihon spring. A river of life and deliverance that flows into the city to this day. A river that is a miracle of vision, mighty work, and God's grace.

God alone can create. But he created us to participate in advancing his creation. God alone can save. But he allows the work that we do to become part of his great purposes in the world. Whatever you do that is wholesome, honest, and productive contributes to God's purposes in the world. Your work for God is not only when you are at church. It's all the time that you are giving yourself to the higher purpose contained in all good and faithful efforts. Fare forward beloved. Your labor is not in vain! Rejoice in whatever God gives you to do, for all good work glorifies God.