

The God of Genesis
Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31

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I lift up my eyes to the hills –
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth. (Ps. 121:1-2)

Our help is in the name of the Lord,
who made heaven and earth. (Ps. 124:8)

Bible verses like those from the Book of Psalms are treasures to us. We love them because they tell of help that comes from God, and all of us know, one way or another, there is a help we need just now, a help we need as individuals, as a church, and as a nation. How good it is to know there is God who is a steady help in time of need, a God who promises to be our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home (Watts).

But how many of us truly know God? How many of us have much to say about who God is?

According to some observers, no one is more prominent in our faith than God and yet no one is more neglected in our faith than God. Several years ago, someone writing in *The Christian Century* magazine made the point that God is “a missing presence” in the worship services of the church. He noted the prevailing mood in many sanctuaries is more one of congregational self-preoccupation than awareness of divine reality.¹ Around the same time as that article appeared, a Canadian professor of preaching said that God, as an active character, is missing from the typical Christian sermon these days, or at least makes at best a cameo appearance every now and then.² We preachers talk of everything but God and we worshipers think of everyone but God. An older colleague of mine harrumphs about a banner now popular in the United Church of Christ. The banner calls us to “Be the Church” and lists on its crowded page activity after activity we can do to be the church; but loving God is listed quite belatedly. It is second to last and not even the culminating activity.

The single most important issue today may be that God is an afterthought among us.

This fall I want to put first what ought to be first: the God of yesterday and today. And so this morning I am beginning a course of book sermons that show who God is as God appears in a selection of successive books of the Bible. The Bible is a library and each book in it highlights something different about God. It is always the same God, but the different historical situations

¹ Edward Farley, “A Missing Presence,” *The Christian Century*, January 1, 1998, p 276.

² Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), p. 20ff.

of the separate books lead to unique insights into God's nature and character. All can be helpful for us today as we hope to look to the one who is our present help in time of need.

I begin our course with the God of Genesis.

The God of Genesis is a God who creates.

Genesis has the name that it does because it is a book of beginnings. It speaks of when things were generated, and it roots the genesis of all things in God, a God who is present right in the first sentence before the beginning of anything takes place. This God of Genesis creates in mystery. Long ago, St. Augustine told of some questioner who asked an old man what God was doing before God created the heavens and the earth. The old man responded, "He was creating Hell for the overly curious like you."³ Augustine did not appreciate the old man's way of ridiculing an honest question, but he liked the idea that God created in secret. No one was there to watch, to see how things were done by the divine hand at the divine drawing board. And so there is no argument on the Bible's side of it between science and religion; Genesis does not presume to say or even know how God created. It only but surely affirms that God is the one who did the creating, all in mystery.

The God who creates in mystery creates with power. The writer of Genesis describes the nothingness that was present prior to creation as a deep, and rather imagines it as a vast windswept expanse of a boundless ocean, constantly moving, perpetually changing, with nothing solid in sight. The deep is complete chaos. There is no form. There is no substance. There is no stability. Chaos is the rule. God exercises the power of creativity over that chaotic universe and builds a universe of order. The Book of Genesis knows a God of immense power. How much power does God have? Enough to bring into order the turmoil of any chaos you can imagine, however unruly.

The God who creates in mystery and with power creates with extravagance. There seems to be no end to God's creativity in Genesis. God comes across as fun-loving in the development and design of species after species and variety after variety of all manner of plants and animals and wildlife. There seems no end to it. The extravagance of God is on full display in the natural world. The Book of Genesis can't and doesn't show it all to us, but it points to the world around us – the forests, the seas, the landscapes, the habitats, the skies, the reaches of outer space. The extravagance of abundance marks it all. So when you think of God never think of God as one who runs out of something. With God there is enough. How much we do not as yet know, but however much, there is enough in God's abundance.

We should also stop to notice that the God who creates in mystery with power and extravagance also creates with deep and loving appreciation. God sees what God has made, smiles upon it, and calls it very good.

But let's pass to a second feature of the God of Genesis.

The God of Genesis is a God who judges.

This aspect of my theme focuses on the story of Noah and the flood. The judgment of God appears elsewhere in Genesis, of course, but it shows up in a concentrated way in the story

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.xii. See also John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xiv.1.

of Noah and the flood. The details of this familiar story seem altogether ludicrous. There is no way one man, even with the help of his family, could have collected two of every kind of animal on the earth and boarded them all on a boat to ride out a storm. The story could have a basis in fact: a certain farmer in a certain county could have safely preserved his few animals on a raft of some kind in a storm of some kind that led to a flood of some kind that wreaked havoc on farms for miles around. That could be true. But regardless of whether the facts of the story as it appears in Genesis are true, the point of the story is true. Katherine Anne Porter, an essayist and short story writer once said, "I will try to tell the truth, but the result will be fiction."⁴ That could be the case with the story of Noah and the flood. It may never have happened, but the story it tells is exactly true.

The truth the Book of Genesis wishes to convey is that God looks for righteousness. And God is able to find righteousness in every soul where righteousness lives. There may be a world of unrighteousness, and the righteousness of the righteous can seem lost like a needle in a haystack. But not to God. God looks for righteousness and finds it, wherever it may be. There was one righteous person in the world, the story says: Noah; and God was able to find him. No righteous living is lost to God. None is ignored. None is overlooked.

The God who judges deals with unrighteousness privately. Genesis concentrates solely on the ark. One of my favorite verses in Genesis, at least in this part of the story, declares that God closed the door of the ark after Noah, his family, and the animals were all safely inside (7:16). God closed the door. I take that to mean not only that Noah was safely shut in from the storm; he was also shut out from the judgment happening outside. He did not get to see how God dealt with those outside the ark. That was none of his business. That was between God and the unrighteous. I wonder how much better off we would be today if the presumably righteous people stopped trying to dictate how the presumably unrighteous should be dealt with and left it to God.

This God of judgment provides a way of salvation. That is the takeaway from the story of Noah. Don't linger long on the details of the story. Follow its theme. The flood – think back to the ocean of complete chaos at the beginning – always threatens to return and does return. But you can ride it out by practicing obedience to God, getting on board the ark of faithfulness.

We leave Noah now and pass to a third feature of the God of Genesis.

The God of Genesis is a God who calls men and women.

This part of my sermon brings me to the story of Abraham and Sarah. We find in their story that God comes to people gradually, inviting them into relationship. They testify that God spoke to them in their old age in their hometown and called them to dream a new dream and to move in a different direction. The story on the page makes it seem as though this call – this realization – came to these two at the same time and all of a sudden. But it could have been a long time coming. It could have happened over the course of several long conversations, maybe conversations spread out over a period of years. They may have wrestled with many a conflict, many a doubt (Elliott). The word of God came to them slowly.

⁴ Katherine Anne Porter, *Collected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2008). This quotation is taken from a selection called "My First Speech."

Even so, the record in Genesis is that God's word that comes slowly comes at times quite vividly. There is a scene in which Abraham is trying to do the right thing but it looks to be all in vain. He has a sacrifice – an offering – all ready to go; he has pledged to God all that God has asked him to pledge. But while he is waiting for God to do God's part, vultures swoop in and try to steal the sacrificial animals Abraham has obediently pledged to God. He has to spend much of a night chasing the vultures away. God seems silent and nowhere in sight. Then at last, a smoldering pot, a flare-like kind of thing, comes as if from heaven and passes through the space Abraham has made for the sacred. And with that there is a vivid reassurance (15:17-21). God's word comes to us slowly, but it comes at times quite vividly. I'm sure you have experiences like that in your memory.

We should note, however, that God's word that comes slowly and at times vividly comes at intervals which are sometimes long. God did not speak to Abraham and Sarah constantly. Our perceptions are that the people of the Old Testament had daily video chats with God which made their faith an easy thing to keep. But decades passed between Abraham's and Sarah's hearings. Decades. Still God was with them. God hadn't forgotten them and they did not give up.⁵

We've said the God of Genesis is a God who creates, a God who judges, and a God who calls to men and women. Let's pass to a fourth feature of the God of Genesis.

The God of Genesis is a God who addresses each successive generation.

Genesis is a long book because it encompasses several generations. Dr. Blackwood loved to say that Genesis is a book about the home primarily because it tells of how God continued to meet with the subsequent generations of a single family, beginning with Abraham and Sarah and continuing through to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.⁶ We older folk often fear that younger generations will not have the faith that has been such a blessing to us. The older folk who preceded us had the same fear in their time when we were young, but look at us. We may not have the strength of faith we'd like to have, but we still look to God to be our help and strength. That we look to God has little to do with us and much to do with God, who has a way of speaking to each new generation in its time.

The God who speaks to each new generation meets each new generation differently. God spoke to Isaac in Genesis as assuredly as God spoke to Isaac's parents, Abraham and Sarah, but not in the same way God spoke to Abraham and Sarah. And God spoke to Jacob differently than God spoke to Isaac. Some of the fears we elders have over the faith of our children and our children's children stem from our assumption that they have to hear God in the same way we heard and serve in the same way we served. Genesis tells of a God who speaks to each generation in a different way, leading that new generation in its individuality.

Yet this God who meets each new generation differently meets each generation consistently. A cartoon shows Charlie Brown and Snoopy sitting on the end of a pier. Their backs are to us as they gaze upon a lake in front of them. It is as though Charlie Brown speaks

⁵ Clovis G. Chappell Sermons, Genesis (Series 1), p. 6, MSS_365_Box2Folder2.pdf. Archives and Manuscript Department, Pitts Theological Library, Emory University.

⁶ Andrew W. Blackwood, *Bible History: Genesis to Esther* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1928), p. 9ff.

for us all when he says, “The world is suddenly crazy.” Snoopy speaks for the whole of the best of Christian theology when he responds, “Good thing God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”⁷

Over in Birmingham, England, there is a church, once quite famous, that is part of our partner denomination, the United Reformed Church. It was once called Carr’s Lane Congregational Church. It had a strong, gifted, and influential pastor in the 1800s named Robert William Dale who served the church for forty-two years. When R. W. Dale died in 1895, the people of Carr’s Lane called a man by the name of John Henry Jowett to be their new pastor. John Henry Jowett’s friends told him he should not accept the call. “Don’t follow Dale,” they said, “you’ll be forever in his sainted shadow; the people of the church won’t accept you; you’ll be doomed to disappointment.” Jowett did not listen to his friends. He accepted the call to Carr’s Lane and in his first sermon from its pulpit he acknowledged all R. W. Dale’s prowess and fame. But then he added, “It is my joy and my encouragement to know that I serve the same King, the same resources of Grace are open to me, and the same Holy Spirit is pledged to sanctify me, and to lead me to the truth . . . On these I shall lean, and with these I dare to face the labors of tomorrow with a quiet and trustful courage.”⁸

The God of yesterday is the God of today and the God of today is the God of yesterday. God speaks to each new generation in its time and in its way.

Next week our topic for the morning will be the God of Exodus. You will find it helpful, I believe, if you take some time this week to read the Book of Exodus or at least peruse it to refresh yourself as to its contents. That will help you follow the sermon as I go along telling about the God of Exodus.

For now, I ask you to believe in the God of Genesis. Dedicate yourself anew to a living faith in the God who creates, who judges, who calls to men and women one by one, and who addresses each new generation in its own way. Believe that this God of mystery, power, extravagance, and loving appreciation, who sees righteousness where it can be found and who leads to a way of salvation and new life, is speaking to you here and now, the way God spoke to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants. Understand that you are one of their descendants, too, and that the same God who blessed generation upon generation is ready to bless you in ways that bring the best of God’s promise to fruition in your life. And say with renewed conviction,

I lift up my eyes to the hills –
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

⁷ This cartoon appeared on a Facebook post contributed by one of my friends. I have no idea how to identify its source, but I do note the cartoon does not bear the signature of Charles M. Schulz.

⁸ Arthur Porritt, *John Henry Jowett* (New York: George H. Doran, 1924), p. 73-74. Jowett happily served Carr’s Lane for 16 years.