

Creation: God's Risky Decision – Dream or Nightmare?

The Genesis Story of the People of Israel

Text: Genesis 9:8-11

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Then God said to Noah... I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you... and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." Genesis 9:8-11

The Bible is a forbidding book. In order to get some handle on it, let's try for a few Sunday mornings to look at large chunks, with broad strokes, in order to see how those large chunks fit into a whole to tell "The One Story of the Bible." Our beginning is with the first eleven chapters of Genesis. But those first eleven chapters, while they speak of the beginning of all things, are not really the beginning of the biblical story. To go to the beginning of the biblical story, we would have to go to the book of Exodus, to the birth of the people Israel. Here we find Moses leading the Israelites out of the slavery and bondage of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. The Exodus, the movement from Egypt and slavery to the land flowing with milk and honey, that was the founding story of this people Israel.

The Creation story is the story of this people. This people Israel, like every people, told stories. They told stories in order to understand themselves, who they were, and to communicate that understanding to the rising generations. They told stories of beginnings, like every people. They told stories of the ancient past. They told stories in order to understand themselves in the broad scheme of things. They told these stories in order to understand how they related to the whole cosmic reality and the whole human history, how they as a people related to all other peoples. They told stories in order to explain why life was like it was, and how to respond to it, and from what perspective to interpret it. They told stories. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are the stories that this people Israel told in order to explain what they believed—what they believed to be true about the world, about history, and about themselves, and about God. This people Israel told their stories in order to give expression to their faith, for they were first of all a people of faith.

Perhaps you will then say to me, "Well, then these stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis are human creations? Are they simply *stories* that people told?" And I would say, "Yes . . . and No . . ." Yes they are human creations, they are stories that this community told, that expressed their faith. But whence did those stories arise? They arose out of the experience this people had with the One who was transcendent, the One who was beyond them, the One whom they understood to be the source of all life—Creator of all. Their stories arose out of their encounter with the Living God. So there's a sense in which you could say yes, these biblical stories are human creations, but they are more than that; they speak of human experience of being encountered by God. Out of that encounter they gave witness to the things that they believed about the God who encountered them.

As the centuries went by and the nation of Israel developed, the stories they told in an oral tradition eventually became written down and gathered together. So, we have today the Hebrew Scriptures or the First Testament. (Rather than the Old Testament. To say the Old Testament it sounds as though the New Testament superseded the Old, as though Israel has been surpassed. I think that that is insensitive and I don't really believe that to be the case. I think more and more we come to see that we, with Israel, worship this one God who creates all and is full of grace.) So, the Hebrew Scriptures or the First Testament will be our primary focus for a few weeks. And that Hebrew scripture begins not with the beginning of the Hebrew *people*—that's told us in the book of Exodus – but what they believed about the Source of all things. They said there is, because God said, "Let there be." That is the creation story told poetically by James Weldon Johnson, expressed marvelously by Franz Josef Heyden, recorded here by the First Testament writer in the first chapter as a creed of creation. This story is recorded in the midst of Israel's exile and despair, as an affirmation of faith, that a Creator created all things. Why is there anything, rather than nothing? They said, there is something rather than nothing, because God said, "Let there be." The unraveling of that creation story is simply the explication of the fundamental decision of faith that what is—is, not by accident or chance or an eternal cycle of things, but is the consequence of the Living God who is the creative source of all, who decided in a risky decision to bring into being all that is. That's what they believed.

Then they went on to say, "But how—now that we have located ourselves in this cosmic scheme of things, the consequence of God's creative word—how should we feel about the world and the created order?" They went on in their storytelling to reiterate that statement of God, "It is good," a positive affirmation, a positive affirmation of human life. They said, "Who are we and how are we related?" The storyteller said, "We are related to God, for we are created in the divine image, and with profound insight."

This story also helped them to see that the human person, created in the divine image, self reflective, created with freedom and responsibility, was also shaped

out of the mud of the earth—dust, humus. After the rain the worms buckle up the soil—that's humus, the excretion of the worm. The humus is the stuff that God shaped to make the human person. Humus. Its root is in the word humility; the root of humility is the root of humor. In God's good humor, God making a joke, created a being out of humus that had a spirit that could soar with God's own so the human person beckoned upward, pulled downward, lives in this constant tension. The Israelite tradition said, see, that's why we are like we are. But someone else said, "But why? This God is good, and if this God created humankind in God's own image, why all the disease and all the dis-ease? Why all the trouble, the anguish and the pain? Why does it sometimes seem that this creation is not a dream, but a nightmare?" The answer was: Not God's fault. The Creator called the creature to live in freedom within limits, in harmony with creation, and the Creator. But the risky part of it was that the creature had the potential to say, "No," and with arrogant pride to usurp the place of the creator, to seek human autonomy.

All of that is in those primitive stories. The writer was trying to give expression to the conviction of Israel that creation is good because God is good, and God called it forth. The human person is good because it is shaped after the image of God, yet rooted in the earth, full of conflict, set always before choice, called always to choose life, to choose the way of wisdom.

But again and again and again, say the storytellers, these persons choose wrongly, bringing on alienation, disharmony, grief, death. The third chapter of Genesis, following on the story in the Garden of Eden, tells us about Adam and Eve and the trees and the temptation to eat from the tree. And the choice to do what God had said they should not do, to eat from the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. But that's not a story that happened at 6:00 a.m. on the first day of creation, because these are not historical narratives as though day one is in chapter one, and day two is in chapter three, then day four, or month six, or whatever. No, these are a series of little stories, a series of portraits, of snapshots. So, in chapters two and three we have a human couple, created for a garden of paradise, an Eden of delight, who usurped their limits of the freedom and brought grief upon them. Then, it is not as though from that point on there is no more human possibility to choose rightly. In the fourth chapter there are two brothers, Cain and Abel. Cain gets an angry eye over against his brother and he becomes jealous of his brother. He has hatred growing in his heart, and he rises up and he kills his brother. But the word of the Lord comes to him and says you did that because your mother and father sinned, therefore, you are a sinner and are totally depraved; you can't help yourself. Sin crouches at your door, but you can master it, but you didn't.

If you want to call that the "fall" in Genesis 3, then you have a second "fall" in Genesis 4. There the writer tells us that human civilization and culture developed, and with the developing culture of the civilization there was an increase in wickedness on the earth until God shook his head and he said, "I wish I wouldn't

have done it. I took a risk. I wish I wouldn't have taken a risk." The storyteller uses anthropomorphic words— so child like, so profound—revealing the anguish of a God who is engaged and involved, who says, "I will wipe it out."

Ah, but we're told, there's Noah. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. He was a righteous man. God snatched Noah and his family out of the abyss of the flood, and when the floodwaters passed away God said, "You know, I'm never going to do that again. I am going to make a covenant pledge with the created order and every living being and humankind. I'll never destroy it again and I am going to put a rainbow in the sky to be reminded every time I see it that I am pledged to stick with this risky experiment all the way to the end. I'll never let it go." Such grace! Then you have Noah's sons and their trouble, and the final story in these eleven chapters is the story of the Tower of Babel where they begin to build this tower toward heaven. Again with such profound wisdom and insight the storyteller is telling us that it is the human project to usurp the place of God, to build the secular city, to organize all of life without regard to the Creator, to break the limits. So we have the dispersion of the people due to the confusing of their tongues. Because, when communication breaks down, community is impossible and the world becomes hell.

That's how this people Israel related themselves to the total cosmic scheme of things, to the whole flow of human history, to God whom they affirmed to be the source of all life, and how they understood the reason there was so much pain and trouble in the world. Not blaming God, and never letting themselves off the hook as though, "We're just human, and we are fallen; therefore, marred forever and it can't ever be any different." Always calling themselves back to choose life, to live obediently – that was their understanding and their goal in the telling of these stories. Those eleven chapters are foundational for the rest of the story because, you see, what the writer did was say "We, as this peculiar people of Israel, are who we are, chosen by God because in the beginning—Adam and Even, Cain and Abel, the people of Noah's generation, the Tower of Babel—again and again and again human failure, human cussedness, human obstreperousness was the choice." But God says, "I can't let it go. I'll never abandon my people, so I am going to have to do something."

What follows is the story of Abraham. Does the writer just happens to tell us that Abraham's wife, Sarah, was a woman with a barren womb? I don't think that the writer slipped that in order that there might be a wonderful trivia question some generations later. The writer was using a metaphor to tell us that Israel would be born as a new creation of *God*, out of a barren womb which only God could do in order to be a people to bring light and truth to the nations on behalf of the God who was the Creator of all. Out of the womb of Sarah that was barren, and at her age as wrinkled as a dried prune, God would bring a people as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sands of the sea. But I am anticipating next week—for now let me say just two things. These marvelous stories answer the fundamental question: All that is, is because God said, "Let there be."

I received a magazine at my Wednesday night class, brought by one of my friends. *The Scientific American*, a special issue, October 1994 celebrating 150 years of continuous publication. The theme, "Life in the Universe," has marvelous articles about the latest bits of knowledge we have about the earth, the evolutionary process, the human person, the extra-terrestrial investigations, the environment, all of that. Marvelous! Now I want to say there is nothing in this [magazine] that is in conflict with this [Bible]. The tragic history of the conflict between religion and science has done irreparable damage to the cause of Christ and the mission of God for the world. This [magazine] talks about how, when, by what means—maybe this, maybe that. It speaks of baffling questions yet unsolved, yet a continual probing, searching, reflecting. This [Bible] says nothing about what this [magazine] says, except that there would not be this [Bible] if there were not One who said, "In the beginning, let there be." It states that in the beginning, God created. It is the affirmation of faith, the absolute affirmation of faith, and it is the primary goal of this book to say only that. This is a book of faith by a people who believed that all that is is because God said, "Let there be. That's all! And that is everything! With such a faith we can relax, say, go to it, all you scientists. Unravel the mysteries, tell us the exciting news that brings ever more awe to the human mind as secrets are revealed."

Tuesday and Wednesday this week at Hope College there is a Critical Issues Seminar on Human Genetic Engineering. The chief of the whole project from Washington, DC will be there Tuesday night. Medical questions, ethical decisions, all of those things need to be figured out. All this book [Bible] says is that the reason that you seek the answers is because you seek the God who is the ultimate source. Now, use your minds, your best judgment. Find the path of wisdom. Choose life." And there is free rein to uncover the secrets of this marvelous universe, whose complexity is but a witness to the wonder of the Creator.

One further word, those opening chapters are eloquent in their statement about human wrong headedness, wrong heartedness, wrong choices, pride, arrogance. Are you a cursed people? Oh my, are you ... and I with you. The Hebrew Scriptures point to the hopelessness of the human person, but never in a hopeless kind of way. There is no "fall" that marks generations from thereon. That's an imposition on the stories. That's a doctrinal system that has done terrible disservice to the human person, robbed the human person of dignity, stripped the human person of self esteem, put the human person under a load of shame and guilt. And it doesn't come from these scriptures. It is imposed upon it. Do we make wrong choices? Yes, we do. Have we in the past? Yes. Will we in the future? Yes, we will. But God says, "I won't give up, and when you fall down I will pick you up and put you back on the road." These chapters, we understand them in the Hebrew tradition, are terribly honest about the human condition. We are hopeless, but not without hope because God is full of grace. Well, a risky decision like that might seem a nightmare. But God will never abandon the dream. Thank God.