

God's Grace in Our Gloom

From the sermon series: This is Our Father's World

Text: II Corinthians 5: 19, 20; 6: 2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them... II Corinthians 5: 19

...be reconciled to God. II Corinthians 5: 20

...now is the day of salvation. II Corinthians 6: 2

It is fitting that on Reformation Sunday we should address the theme, "God's Grace in Our Gloom," because it was especially the Grace of God that came to expression in the 16th Century in the Reformation of the Church. It was the message of justification by faith, which was rooted in the gracious outreach of God toward His lost and straying children that was the good news of the Gospel that reverberated across the European continent. It was that message which had gotten buried under Traditionalism; that message, that good news which had been lost in the Church's control of people and its manipulation of people through tradition and structure and a kind of sacramental practice that did not come off as good news, but rather as bad news. God's grace in our gloom is a fit Reformation theme and it is also a fit subject for discussion of these early chapters of Genesis that we are looking for in these weeks.

This is our Father's world, and in this world He has a struggle because He created us with the ability to disobey and turn our backs upon Him. He called us to a great destiny but gave us the freedom either to respond or not to respond and since He doesn't crush us or coerce us, since He doesn't use His almighty power to roll over us like a steam roller, but rather waits and pleads, there is built into the very structure of Creation the possibility that the one created in His image will not respond to Him, but rather will reject Him; will not find his peace in being the creature in the care of the Creator, but rather, as a rebel, will revolt against the Creator and the authority of God.

The early chapters of Genesis are foundational for all that follows, and in Chapters two and three we find the creation of man and woman and their Temptation and Fall, falling out of fellowship with God and bringing with it all the consequences that came in the wake of that rebellion. As we look at these chapters, I want you to see that in Chapters one and two we really have two Creation accounts.

We looked at the first Creation account the last two weeks; the fact that all there is, is because God said, "Let there be ..." And then the most fundamental fact about the human being - that he and she are created in the image of God. I said last week that was the most fundamental fact, and it is. I said last week there is more to be said, and we will do that this week, but before I go on to say any more, I want to stress once again that the human being is created in the image of God. That means that you are a person of dignity, of worth and of value. It means that the human being, then, can never be put down, and it means that we ought never to put ourselves down. We have been created in the image of God, and that is the most fundamental truth about our human nature. We reflect God. As the Psalmist said, He made us a little lower than Himself. It was precisely in the grandeur with which He created us that there lay the potential for the disaster that has ensued upon our turning away from Him. But even in our turning away from Him and the tragedy that we have introduced into the world, we have not overcome the most fundamental fact and that is that we are created in the image of God, we reflect God; in other words, you are really something!

Now, I think in the Church we have perhaps had the stress the other way around. We have stressed the human being as sinner rather than the human being as creature. I don't want to make that mistake. I want to say it again loud and clear - the human being created in the image of God is really something! You are really something. And our sin and rebellion with all of its disastrous consequences has never wiped out that most fundamental fact - that we were created like God and we are still called to be His ally and His friend and companion to live in relationship with God and with our fellow men. That is fundamental.

Now, in these opening chapters, after Chapter one where we have the Creation account, we have in Chapter two a second Creation account where the focus is on the creation of man and woman. This is that delightful story of God's scooping up the clay and forming the man and breathing into him the breath of life, subsequently also seeing that it is not good for man to dwell alone, creating the woman from Adam's rib from which some have derived the idea that woman is really a "de-rib-ative" of man. (Sorry about that - I can never resist those.)

Actually, that creation of the woman, a second act of Creation, would indicate that man and woman are created equally, that they stand equally before God. We could have a whole sermon and a whole series of sermons on the legitimacy of the feminist movement on the basis of Genesis one and two, and we could point out the tale of error and of horror which has ensued from a misreading of those

chapters in regard to the oppression of women down through the centuries. So, women of the world, unite! You've got biblical basis. But I'm not going to go into that today. I simply want to say that in Chapter two you have man and woman created by God and set in a garden in what we call that state of paradise.

And then we have Chapter three and there we have the Temptation and the succumbing to temptation and the consequent judgment of God. And then Chapter four we will look at next week -the first murder. - it would seem that there is another Fall. And Chapter six, the story of the Flood, the disobedience and the judgment of God - another Fall. And then God starting over again, but in Chapter nine the Tower of Babel - another Fall, where finally the race demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that they will not live as the creatures of God under His care and His communion, but rather as rebels against God and structuring life apart from Him.

The early chapters of Genesis are the prelude to the story of Israel, to the call and the election of Abraham and the whole redemptive history that followed. The first eleven chapters are like a prelude to all of that specific history, and in these first eleven chapters the great issues of humankind and of God and of history are dealt with. And what I want you to see is that man and woman created in Chapter two and in that garden of paradise may not be separated from man and woman in Chapter three. The chapter divisions of the Bible are very handy for reference. I don't know what I would do about my text if it wasn't that there is Genesis one and two and three and so on, and all of those little verses that give preachers text, but as a matter of fact, what comes through is the idea in Chapter two that you have man and woman perfect in paradise, Chapter three as though now you make another step and you have man and woman in the Garden rebelling and falling into sin.

If I were to try to wipe out of your mind the idea of a perfect state in paradise in Chapter two and the Fall of mankind in Chapter three, I would give up before I would start. It is so deeply engrained in our consciousness; we have thought so long that way that I don't think it is possible to get that out of your head, but if I could get it out of your heart, I would, because then I would say to you that what we have in Genesis two and three is not the story of Mr. Adam and Mrs. Eve, two historical figures way back in primeval history. What we have in Genesis two and three is the *story of every man and every woman*; the story of Adam and Eve is the story of you and me. The story of Adam and Eve is not about some primeval, distant past at the dawn of Creation. The story of Adam and Eve is the story about every human being that has ever been born, and those chapters which make one continuous story and ought not to be read in two stories, are not historical accounts such as we find later in the Old Testament when, for example, we read the exploits of David. David was a real historical figure, he was a king of Israel, he fought battles and did all kinds of things and we can read that in the kind of interpreted history that we have in the Old Testament.

We are not dealing with that kind of material in Genesis two and three. In the first chapter we are told that God spoke and created all things, and we are told that He created the human being in His own image. And now Chapters two through eleven will begin to unravel that story in preparation for the real story of the Bible that begins with Abraham. And these chapters are necessary because the Israelite who knew God as the God of Redemption said, "How do we relate to the rest of mankind? How does God relate to the rest of mankind? And if God is good and Creation is good, why is life so tough? If God is good and Creation is good - if it all came from Him, then why are things in such a mess? If God is good and this is His good Creation, then why is there such sorrow and such pain and such tragedy in the world?"

Those are ultimate questions. Those are not questions about fig leaves and apple trees and snakes and two primeval human beings scurrying around the bushes. Those are the ultimate questions of life. Why is there anything rather than nothing? Who created the heavens and the earth? What relationship does the human being have to God? He is created in God's image; he is like God; he reflects the very being of God.

Well, if the human being came from God and if all of Creation was pronounced good, then why is the human being like he is? Why are there wars and trials and all of the dark shadows that are a part of the human scene?

Those are the questions underlying those early chapters. And in the third chapter, which we read a moment ago, we have the people of Israel, the people who had come to know God, the people who came to believe that their God was a God Who redeemed them in the Exodus experience and was also the Creator of the heavens and the earth. God alone. We have their testimony as to the fact that God is good and Creation is good and that humankind was created by God for His own purpose: created to live in relationship and fellowship with God, but given such a great gift of freedom, there was the opportunity for him to become a rebel rather than one who lived in relationship. And so those chapters are there to tell us the story of the Fall. Let me say it again: Not an historical story as though on Day One of Creation Adam and Eve walked to the Garden and picked grapes and chewed nuts and had fellowship with each other and a chat with God that evening. Day Two maybe went all right, and maybe Day Three, maybe six weeks, maybe six months, but eventually a snake came in and then there was a time when it all fell apart.

Friends, that's not what the story is all about. The story is a symbol; it is a sign, and it says to us that there is something about human nature that has endemic within it this struggle against the God Who is its only hope and its salvation, and in that story what it is saying to us, first of all, is that there are things that are wrong in the world, and there certainly are; it's not God's fault. What it is saying to us as human beings is that God created us good with a potential for good and for obedience, for following the path of life, but that there is something within us

that seems to choose the path that leads to disaster. It is saying to us that whatever sin is, it is not part and parcel of Creation. It does not stem from God, and you can't blame it on the Devil. Whatever sin is, whatever is wrong, is wrong because you and I choose to be wrong. That's the biblical message. It's a tough message because it holds us accountable. It does not allow us to slough off the accusing finger in any direction. We cannot blame God. We cannot blame the Devil. We cannot blame the environment or the circumstances, for that symbolic story tells us that we were created in the image of God and put in a situation that can be described as paradisiacal, that we had everything going for us and that in spite of all that, we turned our back on the One Who is life-giving and the source of all blessing. That is what the story is trying to tell us.

And you see, it is *my* story and it is *your* story. Until we read the Bible as not some ancient book with answers to the questions that our curiosities might raise, but rather as a book that addresses *us* - until we can read this book so that my story becomes a part of The Story, then I see that I am a part of Adam and then I realize that whatever is wrong in my life and whatever dire consequences have flowed from those wrong choices, they are my choices. I am responsible. And that is one of the greatest things you can say to a human being. You are responsible. You are responsible for your life; you are responsible for your choices; and you are guilty when you choose the wrong way. Otherwise, what are we?

Animals cannot be guilty. They have no freedom of choice. And those who have no mental capacity and no freedom of choice - neither can they be guilty. It is only people who are created with that God-like characteristic that can be held accountable as we are accountable, and in the story, this ancient story by which Israel came to understand itself, it was saying that there is something that is deadly wrong in the human heart and it stems from the human will. It is not because God did it to us, and it is not because the Devil did it to us, and it is not because the situation is so bad.

Now, some situations are bad and environment does shape and there does, over the centuries and the generations, come to build up a kind of fate that does have its impact upon us. I don't want to say that we all come into the world with pristine situations where we can choose freely without any influence, any impact of environment or of heredity. All of that is true. *But finally to be human is to be responsible and to choose.* And the scriptures tell us that we chose to be gods rather than to be creatures of God. And so, the story will go on, the prelude to that history of God with Israel and Jesus, that we have in the Old and New Testaments, will go on and we will see another instance and another instance and another instance of this fatal flaw within us.

But as we see that, we will also hear the more dominant note - the note of Grace. Even in this third chapter, if we had gone on to read, we would find that God speaks to that serpent and says that, although the serpent will bruise the heel of the seed of the woman, the seed of the woman will finally crush the head of the

serpent, and that has always been seen in the history of the Church as the first promise of the Gospel, so that the seed of the woman Paul interpreted as referring to Jesus. And the final crushing of the serpent's head as Jesus' crucifixion whereby he put an end to death taking upon himself our sin and our guilt.

Even in Chapter three of Genesis there is a foregleam of something to come. But if we go to the New Testament we find those great themes that set Martin Luther afire and Zwingli and Calvin and the rest. For the theme of the Bible is not human disobedience, is not human depravity and human sin. Oh, it's there and really you cannot underscore it enough, but if you stay there you miss the theme of the Bible, which is the theme of Grace. It is the story of God's grace in our gloom.

Now, the thing that happened in the medieval Church was that the Church became the controlling agent of people's lives. It was almost as though the Church said, "You are sinners, and we're glad, because now we can control you." And the thing that really set off Luther and set off Zwingli was that agents of the Church were going through the land and were collecting money to say prayers to release loved ones from purgatory and one could even buy one's indulgence into the sins that one might commit next week. And of course this was not the whole Church, but it was right at the heart of the Church and there were those who were going through the continent of Europe raising funds for the erection of St. Peter's.

And there were good Catholic priests who said, "This is wrong." Martin Luther was one of them. Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland, was another. And they began to preach the Grace of God and as they began to preach the Grace of God, people responded to good news, because now it was no longer, "Come forward and drop in a coin or burn in Hell." Now it was not the continual laying on people their guilt and their unworthiness and their sin in order to hold them down and control them and manipulate them, but now it was the announcement of what God had done in the face of their sin. So that we have a proclamation like Paul's in the New Testament lesson where he says certainly we are sinful; certainly the whole world is guilty before God. But God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself so that if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. Old things are passed away; all things are become new. So that Paul understood himself as an ambassador of Christ and he went through the world and he said, "Be ye reconciled with God. Stop hiding in the bushes!"

Oh, that profound question of Genesis three as God walks through the Garden in that symbolic story and he says, "Where are you?" and Adam says, "I was afraid." Guilt, fear, shame. And the Lord God comes down and says, "Where are you?" Where are you, not because I want to lumbast you, but where are you because I want to embrace you. Where are you because I want to love you, I want to tell you about my Grace which is greater than all your sins.

For the New Testament message was that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, for God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be

made the righteousness of God in him. And so the Apostle goes on to quote the Old Testament and he says, "In the day that you hear his voice, harden not your heart. This is the day of salvation. Now is the day of salvation." In other words, receive this good news. Accept this Gospel. Come and get a forgiveness that is already provided. If we would take one other New Testament passage, the fifth chapter of Romans, we would find Paul dealing with Genesis three and he says, "As in one man all sin, so in one man all are made righteous." And in that fifth chapter of Romans, it is the most glorious song, anthem, proclamation of the superiority of Grace. For one man sinned but the obedience of one man far surpassed it. And the disobedience of Adam was one thing, but the obedience of Christ was greater and the greater triumph of Grace throughout that passage is a marvelous testimony to the fact that the Church has one theme to proclaim and that is the triumph of Grace. That's the good news.

And so you see, I didn't spend very long in Genesis three. It is the recognition of the Old Testament people of God that there is something wrong; there is something deadly wrong. I am wrong and you are wrong, and there is no soft-pedaling the guilt of the human heart. But I am Adam and I am Eve and you are Adam and you are Eve and the last word is not, "Get out of the Garden." The last word is, "Be reconciled to God." For where sin aboundeth, Grace did much more abound.

Now, how can the Church be a place of bad news? How can the Church ever send anyone out guilty? How can the Church ever send anyone out in despair and hopeless, burdened with all of the rock of their life? There's only one message that ought to be sounded from the pulpit, from the evangelical pulpit, from the Christian pulpit, from the pulpit that is grounded in the Word of God and that is, "Be reconciled to God. Accept your acceptance, because you are already accepted and there's nothing you can do about it, except say, 'Thank you.'"

God's Grace in our gloom. That's the bottom line. Thanks be to God!