

The Election of Grace: A Particular People for a Universal Purpose

From the summer sermon series: Faith's Foundations

Text: Genesis 11:30; 12:1-3; Romans 11:32-36

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Spring Lake, Michigan
July 31, 1988

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Now Sarai was barren... Genesis 11:30

*Now the Lord said to Abram, Go... and I will make of you a great nation...
Genesis 12:1-3*

*For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that He may have mercy upon
all... from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory for
ever. Amen. Romans 11:32-36*

Reading a textbook on preaching this week, I came across a statement by a Black theologian and preacher which struck me. He was making the point that Black culture has believed strongly in the providence of God and this deep trust has kept them alive through much oppression and suffering. Henry Mitchell claims that what has been true for Blacks is universally true. He says,

... We find the total spectrum of humanity that wishes really to live whole and abundantly must have a belief system to support that sort of thing.

I share Mitchell's conviction. That is why we are spending successive Sunday mornings examining Faith's Foundations. My concern is deeply pastoral. I am not really interested in preparing you to write a crackerjack of a theological exam; I am interested in preparing you to live well, abundantly, with confidence and hope.

Hope and confidence and a sense of wellbeing need a solid foundation if they will remain, no matter what circumstances surround you. Faith needs foundation. There are a few crucial truths which, if held in deep trust, enable one to negotiate life's passage. For example, "In the beginning God ..."

That is where the Bible begins. Genesis 1 is intentionally the opening statement of the Judeo-Christian faith. It is our answer to the question, "Why is there something, rather than nothing?" It enables us to sing, "This is my Father's world, I rest me in the thought..."

But why, if this is my Father's world, is there tragedy, toil and tears? Chapters two and three tell us that God's gracious intention was that life should be characterized by freedom, vocation and boundaries - the creature living before the Creator in trust and obedience. Failing that, there is judgment, sorrow and loss, alienation, fear and guilt.

Well, then, will the human "No" defeat the "Yes" of God? Will the Creator's purpose be ruined by the creature's grasping at control in self-assertion? Chapter three gave hints of grace even in judgment. And returning to the opening creed of creation, which runs through chapter 2:4a, we find God's verdict on Creation: it is good. And we read God rested on the seventh day and blessed it and made it holy, a sign that God's design and order and purpose would finally be realized. We read the vision of Isaiah 65 - a new heaven and a new earth, no more would one toil in vain or raise children for misfortune ... "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together ... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain." And we heard the sound of the angel's voice in John's vision, "Behold the dwelling of God is with his people." No tears or crying or pain or death anymore. In the vision there was a crystal river on whose banks grew a tree whose leaves were for the healing of the nations and God's people need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord will give them light and they shall reign forevermore.

With that beautiful vision of Creation's consummation, the People of God have lived in hope trusting that the best is yet to be, the future is as bright as the promise of God. God's "Yes" will not fail. The Sabbath Rest of the Bible's opening passage foreshadows the Rest of Creation in the Shalom of God.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis were placed as a preface to Israel's story. That story is centered in God's mighty saving action that brought them to freedom from Egypt's bondage. But they knew their particular story was part of a larger story - the story of God's dealing with the whole Creation and the totality of humankind. The first eleven chapters are universal in scope just as the consummation in Revelations is universal.

Israel's story is the story of a particular people, but it is not, nor can it be, isolated from the whole creation and all nations. Israel's faith is that the God of its salvation is the Creator of all who will bring all things to consummation. The story of the Christian Church is one with the story of Israel. Within the movement of universal history there is interwoven the history of a particular people - Israel and the Church and the history of that particular people is really the focus of the one story of the Bible. But that particular history is not an end in itself; it is a means to a greater end - the Creator's reclaiming of Creation gone awry.

We have seen in Genesis 1 the Creator's intention for Creation. We have seen in Revelations the Creator's victory - the consummation of the purpose of Creation. But, you may ask - *How do we get from the majestic image of Genesis 1 to the moving vision of Revelation 21 and 22?*

This message will attempt to answer that question - again, not simply to satisfy your curiosity but, rather, in order to give you a sense of what God is doing in our world, in our history, in our lives. We will focus on two passages of scripture as we seek to connect the Garden with the City of God.

In our biblical study let us begin with Genesis 11:27-12:3. Genesis 11:27F gives us the genealogy of Abraham. We tend to skip scriptural genealogies, but this one is critical. The Genesis writer is forming a link between universal history - the history of all humankind about which he writes in the first 11 chapters and the particular history he is about to record, the history of the Patriarchs, the forebearers of Israel.

In Genesis 11:30 we are told that Abram's wife Sarai is barren. This is no piece of Bible trivia; rather, this is a very intentional notation.

Abraham and Sarah are called by God to go out from their family and homeland and go to a place God will show them. God gives them a promise: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings." And the promise continues,

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

With the call of Abraham we have the most significant break in the Scripture - a break of greater significance than the break between the Old and New Testaments. Genesis 12-50 gives us the story of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and forms the introduction to the creation of Israel as a nation in the Exodus event.

This is the beginning of the story of a particular people called for a universal purpose. This particular people will be the agent through which God will reclaim a creation gone awry.

What was the biblical writer saying by connecting the one called Abraham to the human family spoken of in the first eleven chapters? Was he not saying that after the dismal response of the human family to the Creator's call to live in freedom with vocation within the boundaries set by the Creator, the failure of the creature to trust and obey, God was now instituting a new strategy whereby the purposes with which He created would finally be realized in spite of the failure of the creature?

Set on the background of the stories of God and all humankind in the first eleven chapters, we can see in God's call of Abraham the method God will use to reclaim

the Creation gone awry. And against the background of the Creation stories we can understand the significance of the note in 11:30 that Sarai was barren.

The one who calls the world into being will now call a special people into being. Abraham and Sarah are connected to the whole human family - so the genealogy affirms. But what God is about to do is not something possible through natural, normal human agency.

Sarai is barren. The human story recorded in Genesis 1-11 ends in barrenness, in hopelessness. There is nowhere to go.

God must create this new family by the miracle of God's power and grace. God will give a child to a barren woman and through this miracle birth, God will create an alternative community - a new community by which finally God will restore Creation to its unity and bring about Shalom.

On the black background of the stories reflecting universal history, God calls a man and woman who are childless and promises to make from them a great nation that will bring blessing to all nations. The God Who creates the world now creates Israel. God creates Israel in order that, through Israel, God will reclaim all Creation.

Abraham - contrary to the stories in Genesis 1-11 (Adam and Eve, Cain, the Flood story, the Tower of Babel) believes God and acts in faith on the promise of God. God says, "Go." Abraham goes.

This is God's counter-strategy to human rebellion. When human faithlessness leads to barrenness and thus hopelessness, God calls one family to create an alternative community through which to bring salvation to the world. This God is not and will not be defeated. This God will not accept the human "No." This God will now begin a counter-offensive in order finally to establish His "Yes" to Creation.

The call of God to Abraham is spoken of in the Bible as the Election of Grace. It is an election - a choice of a particular people. It is of grace - One was chosen out of the human family with no explanation given, for no reason in the one chosen. It is of God because the call is spoken to, the promise made to human barrenness.

Election is the foundation of human salvation; it is the ground of human hope, the basis of human purpose. Election is a biblical teaching that has been misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Israel had a sense of being God's elect people - and she was. Israel had a sense of being special - and she was. But Israel misunderstood God's election. She came to think of herself as God's special people to the exclusion of the nations rather than seeing in her election a calling to be a light to the nations. Israel became proud of her election rather than understanding that God's election is cause for humility,

for God chooses not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of grace alone - it is pure gift. Rather than awe, humility, gratitude, Israel manifested pride and arrogance. Rather than sensing that she existed for the sake of the world, she set herself over against the world. Rather than seeing in her election God's universal purpose, Israel claimed God's grace as her particular possession. Rather than seeing in her election God's inclusive love, Israel claimed God's love as her exclusive possession.

The History of God and Israel is spoken of in scripture as a covenantal relationship. The Old Testament describes the history of the covenant relationship and describes thus the Broken Covenant. Still, hope is not lost. Still, there is the conviction that God will not give up. There will be a new covenant.

The New Testament is really the story of the New Covenant. Paul was a person of that old covenant who came to see in Jesus the promised Messiah, the anointed one promised in the Old Testament. He saw how the New Covenant was instituted in Jesus, in Jesus' death and resurrection. In Romans 9-11 he struggles with the question why Israel as a whole failed to see that Jesus was the Messiah, that in Jesus the New Covenant was formed.

Paul anguished over Israel's rejection of Jesus. How could this be? Once again the question raised in Genesis 1-11 is raised by Paul: Will Israel's unbelief defeat God's purpose of election? Can the human "No" overcome the Divine "Yes"? Paul's wrestling with the problem of Israel's rejection of Jesus comes out in a tortuous path in those three chapters. If we read the letter as a whole, we find him first of all recognizing that Jew and Gentile are all alike guilty before God. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Then he presents God's way of righting the guilty through faith in Jesus Christ.

In that moving eighth chapter, he writes of how Creation itself in bondage because of human sin, is nonetheless groaning in travail waiting to be set free from the curse - a clear reference to Genesis 3. He concludes his telling of redemption's story with that amazing statement,

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

And he says, "What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us?" He concludes with that grand utterance,

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Then he comes to the source of his deep anguish - Israel's rejection of Jesus. He struggles to understand. Finally, Chapter 11 opens with the question,

I ask then, has God rejected his people?

His answer is a resounding, "By no means!" He addresses the Gentiles who have believed, to whom the Gospel has come through Israel's rejection. He counsels humility and awe before the mysterious working of God's grace. Finally he concludes,

... God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

And the thought of the final triumph of grace causes Paul's heart to overflow in doxology.

O depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Paul cannot solve the mystery, but rather in wonder and awe he bows before the mystery. He knows not when or how, but he rests in the final triumph of the grace of God. This people Israel - Abraham's line - proved as disobedient in their time as did the totality of humankind whose stories are related in Genesis 1-11. Yet, Paul says God will have His way. God's last word is mercy upon all.

The history of Israel from Abraham through all the generations of her history and through 2,000 years of the Christian Church has a midpoint - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When God's people said a resounding "No" to Jesus, putting him to death, God said an even more resounding "Yes," raising him from the dead. It was from Abraham's loins that Jesus came. It was in the barrenness of the human situation that God created an alternative community that issued in Jesus, the Anointed One who responded to God's yes with a faithful "Yes" in return.

And Paul writes to the Ephesians,

For Christ God chose us before the world was founded.

Paul revels in the mystery of God's saving determination, a secret now revealed to him. The secret was a purpose which God formed in His own mind before time began, so that the periods of time should be controlled and administered until they reached their full development in which all things, in heaven and on earth, are gathered into one in Jesus Christ.

How will God bring Creation to the consummation of His purpose? How will history move from the Garden to the City of God? The link is a people who are chosen by God, graced by God, called to be witnesses to God - a particular people

whose gracious election has a universal purpose - to reclaim Creation and to bring all things to the realization of God's purpose.

The Election of Grace is the only basis for hope, but it is enough; it is the sure guarantee that the Creator will bring creation to consummation. It is God's initiative through which He will have a people in every generation to witness to all peoples that God is God and God will finally reclaim Creation and bring all God's children home.

We are the elect of God. To us the Gospel has been proclaimed, the grace of God given. We can rest in that – no matter what the day may bring, no matter how dark the night, how threatening the crises of life. We can count on that – no matter how frail our faith, how feeble our commitment, how fickle our devotion.

That is the Good News by which we live. That is the Good News to which we witness to our neighbor and our world. Thanks be to God!