God’s Pass Over

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G. K. Chesterton tells the story about a young man who left his house on an English mountainside in search of something he had heard about since he was very young. It seems that somewhere out in the distant hills was the shape of a giant man. It was a kind of miracle, people said, how this giant had taken shape in the hills. The boy decided he must find this giant. He must discover this giant if it took his entire life. Across the valleys he hiked, hoping to see the miracle over the next row of hills, but it wasn’t there. As he turned to get his bearings, he saw something. There, where he had come from, the white limestone rock formed the perfect outline of a giant. In the place where its heart would be was the very house he had left. He had been too close to the giant to see it.

Sometimes we’re too close to something to see it. If we stand too close to a large painting, we lack perspective. The best vantage point is stepping back to appreciate the big picture.

In the words of an English idiom, we can’t see the forest for the trees. If we focus too much on small detail, we won’t see the big picture.

A single puzzle piece may contribute little to an overall jigsaw puzzle. We need the big picture before the individual pieces can fall into place.

The same thing can happen when we read the Bible. We can become so mired in its individual stories that we lack the ability to see the big picture. Over the next nine months, we are attempting to tell God’s Big Story from Genesis to Revelation. This sermon series is designed for those who have never read the Bible and don’t know where to start. It’s also intended for those who have read the Bible but don’t understand how the whole thing fits together.

We’ve been preaching on God’s Big Story for the last month. By way of review, we read in Genesis 1-2 that God creates people for relationship. God made us to live in right relationship with God, self and others. But we learn in Genesis 3 that sin destroys this relationship. People fall out of right relationship with God, self and others; what we sometimes call “the fall.” Starting with Genesis 4 and continuing through Revelation, God is about the redemptive work of restoring this relationship.

In simple terms, we might say God creates, sin destroys, but God restores. The Bible is fundamentally a big story about creation, fall and redemption.

God seeks to restore this relationship with God, self and others by means of a covenant. Most business relationships are main-
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A business contract is valid only as long as both parties adhere to it. If one party fails to keep its promise, the contract is broken.

What God offers people is a covenant, not a contract. God’s original covenant centers on the promise, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” God’s covenant cannot be abrogated by any failure on our part. God’s covenant is unconditional and irrevocable. It’s more like the ties that bind parents and children than a business arrangement. If a child is late for curfew, parents don’t say, “Well, that’s it. Pack your bags. You’re out of the family.” One member’s failure in the family doesn’t destroy the relationship.

God’s covenant, as Glenda said last Sunday, includes three promises: the promises of a people, a purpose and a place. It involves a people called Israel. It involves a purpose of serving as priests to the whole world. And it involves a place called the Promised Land.

True to the promise, Abraham and Sarah have a son, Isaac. Isaac and his wife, Rebecca, have two sons: Jacob and Esau. Jacob fathers 12 sons, who evolve into 12 tribes, who eventuate into a nation called Israel.

Everyone might have lived happily ever after if the Egyptian Pharaoh had not forced the Israelites into slavery. So God raises up a leader named Moses who tells Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” Pharaoh tells Moses to take a hike.

God sends ten plagues to get Pharaoh’s attention. The tenth plague does the job. God strikes down every firstborn child in Egypt while sparing the children of Israel. In Exodus, Moses instructs the Israelites to smear the blood of lambs on the doorposts of their homes (12:21-22). The presence of blood ensures God’s pass over (12:23). God establishes this “pass over” as a lasting ordinance among His people (12:24). To this day, Jewish families celebrate a festival called Passover. They retell the Passover story, called the Haggadah, punctuated by four questions asked by children. The first question, “Why is this night different from all over nights?”, is answered with the words, “Tell them it’s the day God passes over the houses of the Israelites and spares them” (12:27).

Passover is a word that means what it says. God passes over people and spares them, rather than destroying them.

So what? you ask. So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

So what number 1: God delivers! Remember the UPS slogan, “We deliver.” In the Big Story of the Bible, God delivers.

As I said earlier, Passover is a word that means what it says. God passes over our sins. God spares us; God cuts us slack.

In the Old Testament, God passes over people through the blood of the Passover lamb. In the New Testament, Christ becomes our Passover lamb. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7). God, in the person of Jesus Christ, passes over our sins. When
John the Baptist sees Jesus for the first time, he declares, “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 2:19).

The 20-year-old movie *Christmas Story* depicts a modern Passover. In the movie, a young boy, Ralphie, is tormented by a bully as he walks home from school. Tired of being teased, Ralphie lets his rage get the best of him. He pummels the bully and unleashes a string of obscenities.

Ralphie is unaware his mother overhears his tirade. She walks him home and sends him to his room. As Ralphie waits tearfully in his darkened room for his dad to come home, he expects the worst possible punishment.

Ralphie’s mother finds the younger brother, Randy, hiding under the sink crying. She asks, “Randy, what’s the matter. Why are you crying?”

Randy sobs, “Daddy’s gonna kill Ralphie!” Even little Randy is terrified of the impending wrath that awaits Ralphie. His mom assures Randy everything is going to work out, but she, too, seems to be fretting about what may come. When Dad arrives home, a wave of terror descends upon Ralphie as he heads downstairs to meet his fate. After small talk, his dad asks about Ralphie’s day. Ralphie realizes he is doomed. He looks at his mother with pained expression.

Surprisingly, she responds, “Nothing much, Ralphie had a fight.”

Dad looks at Ralphie. “A fight, what kind of fight?”

Mom replies, “Oh, you know how boys are. I gave him a talking to. Oh, I see the Bears are playing the Packers Sunday.”

In that moment, Ralphie experiences a modern-day Passover. The doom of which he was so certain passes over him. A smile breaks across his face as he realizes he’s not going to be destroyed after all.

So what number 2: God keeps promises! When God promises people, “I will be your God,” God keeps it!

Here’s the rub: God’s timetable doesn’t always coincide with our own. The Bible condenses thousands of years of history into 1200 pages. You might get the impression these stories happen one right after the other. In truth, there is a considerable amount of waiting for God’s promises. Abraham and Sarah wait 24 years for God to make good on His promise for a child. The people of Israel are enslaved in Egypt for 200-300 years; some say as long as 400 years. God seems in no hurry to deliver on His promises.

We are people who hate to wait. We are products of a fast food, automatic teller, microwave generation. Our six-year-old home computer is already obsolete. It’s too slow!

We live in a different time zone from God. Jesus comes, the Bible says, in the fullness of time. God waits until the time has fully come.

Perhaps you’re seated in God’s waiting room right now, waiting for something to break your way—a job, a college acceptance, a young adult to turn his or her life around or a family member to reconcile. Perhaps you’ve prayed for something, but no answer is forthcoming. You may be wondering, like the people of old,
God wants to restore us to the relationships God intends for us.

has God forgotten me? “I will not forget you,” says the Lord (Isaiah 49:15).

What does the Lord instruct us to do while waiting? Remember God’s Passover! Remember is an all-important Biblical word.

Our nation’s capital is filled with monuments to help us remember the sacrifice of fellow Americans. The Vietnam Memorial helps us remember. The World War II Memorial helps us remember. The refrain from Rudyard Kipling’s poem *Recessional* comes to mind: “Lest we forget, lest we forget.”

We gather in worship to remember. We observe Holy Communion to remember. We meet in small groups, read the Bible and pray to remember.

Our very identity as persons is rooted in memory. Memory makes us what we are. When we lose our memory, we cease to function in a significant way. Those with Alzheimer’s or dementia have lost the most essential part of themselves.

The Ebbinghaus’ Curve of Forgetting measures the amount of material we retain or forget. By the end of this worship hour, you will know 100 percent of what you know. If you do nothing with what you learned today, by tomorrow you will forget 80 percent of what you learned. A month later, you retain two to three percent of what you learned.

Since you’re going to forget most of what I say today, here’s the two percent for you to remember: God creates, sin destroys, God restores.

This morning, I fulfilled the twice-a-day routine of administering medicine to our cat, Eve, by mouth by means of a syringe. She did this morning what has become something of a ritual. When she sees me coming with her medicine, she ducks under the bed and refuses to show her face for hours on end, even though this medicine is keeping her alive.

Some of us treat God’s remedy this way. We run and hide from the very thing that can save us.

God doesn’t want to punish us or crimp our style. God wants to restore us to the relationships God intends for us. You can access this relationship by opening your life to Jesus Christ. When you profess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you open yourself to the kind of life God wants to give you.