

“THE BEGINNING”

A SERMON BASED ON THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOK OF GENESIS (1:1-5) AND PRESENTED AT ORLEAN UMC ON JANUARY 11, 2015

IN OUR OLD TESTAMENT TEXT FOR TODAY, WE HEAR ABOUT THE BEGINNING OF CREATION..... THE CREATION OF THIS WORLD..... ANYTIME CREATION COMES UP AS A TOPIC, I AM MINDFUL OF THE FACT THAT WE CAN OFTEN GET DRAWN INTO THE CRITICAL AND SOMETIMES ACRIMONIOUS DEBATE REGARDING CREATION – CREATION VS. EVOLUTION..... IT IS A HARD TOPIC IN WHICH IT SEEMS AS IF THERE ARE ONLY TWO OPTIONS – YOU CAN BELIEVE IN THE BIBLE AND THE CREATION STORIES FOUND THERE OR YOU CAN BELIEVE IN EVOLUTION AND SCIENCE BUT NOT BOTH.....

**WE FIND THAT THIS QUESTION AND DEBATE IS
CENTERED AROUND LOOKING AT GENESIS 1 AS A
HISTORICAL STATEMENT – ONE THAT SAYS SOMETHING
ABOUT WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN THE PAST.....TODAY -
---I WOULD LIKE FOR US TO TAKE THAT QUESTION AND
VIEW OF GENESIS 1 AND SIMPLY PUT IT ON THE SHELF
FOR NOW..... *AND INSTEAD I WANT US TO THINK
ABOUT GENESIS 1 AS A THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT.....
SOMETHING THAT IS MAKING A STATEMENT ABOUT
GOD. IT IS NOT SAYING SOMETHING ABOUT HISTORY,
BUT SOMETHING ABOUT WHO THIS GOD OF HISTORY IS.*
TO LOOK AT IT THEOLOGICALLY IS TO ASK THE
QUESTIONS: WHAT DOES THIS TEXT SAY ABOUT GOD?
WHAT IS THIS GOD LIKE? WHAT ARE THE
CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD?**

“IN THE BEGINNING WHEN GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH, THE EARTH WAS A FORMLESS VOID AND DARKNESS COVERED THE FACE OF THE DEEP, WHILE A WIND FROM GOD SWEEPED OVER THE FACE OF THE WATERS.”

WHENEVER I THINK OF THE CREATION STORY, I IMAGINE GOD FLOATING IN....WELL, NOTHINGNESS.....OR SOMETHING BEYOND MY COMPREHENSION AND ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND AND DESCRIBE ----- AND THEN GOD SNAPS THE DIVINE FINGERS AND *POOF*, THERE WAS EARTH..... *POOF* THERE WAS LIGHT..... AND *POOF* THERE WAS THE MOON.....

**JUST IMAGINE IF YOU WILL GOD CREATING THE WORLD
OUT OF NOTHING.....**

**BUT GENESIS 1 SUGGESTS SOMETHING DIFFERENT,
DOESN'T IT? IT SUGGESTS AN IMAGE OF GOD
CREATING ORDER OUT OF THINGS THAT ALREADY
EXIST..... *A FORMLESS VOID. DARKNESS. THE
DEEP.....* I WONDER WHAT A FORMLESS VOID IS.....**

**IN FACT, GOD EVEN HAS WIND AND WATER ON THE
WORKBENCH READY TO BE USED..... THESE THINGS
AREN'T NOTHINGS..... THEY ARE SOMETHINGS.....
THINGS AWAITING GOD'S CREATIVE WORK.....**

I VISIT IN MY MIND THE FAMILIAR IMAGE OF GOD AS A POTTER..... GRABBING A BIG HUNK OF CLAY WITH THOSE WET AND CALLOUSED HANDS..... AND THEN STRETCHING AND SQUEEZING AND PULLING AND SHAPING AND FORMING OUT OF THE CLAY THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT. IT'S MESSY. IT ISN'T CLEAN.

BY ASKING OF GENESIS 1 "WHO IS THIS GOD?" ONE THING WE LEARN ABOUT GOD IS THAT GOD WORKS WITH THAT WHICH ALREADY EXISTS AND SEEKS TO BRING LIFE OUT OF IT..... GOD TAKES THE CHAOS AND MESSINESS THAT ALREADY IS AND DESIRES TO CREATE OUT OF IT/OR FROM IT.

**IF WE CONTINUE READING BEYOND TODAY'S
LECTIONARY VERSES----- WE LEARN SOMETHING ELSE
ABOUT GOD..... IN VERSE 11, GOD SAYS, "LET THE
EARTH BRING FORTH VEGETATION" AND IN VERSE 20,
"LET THE WATERS BRING FORTH SWARMS OF
CREATURES." AND THEN IN VERSE 28, "BE FRUITFUL
AND MULTIPLY."**

**DO YOU SEE WHAT ELSE WE LEARN ABOUT GOD? GOD
ISN'T THE ONLY ONE CREATING HERE. CONSIDER THIS:**

**GOD SAYS TO THE EARTH, "BRING FORTH
VEGETATION." TO THE WATERS, "BRING FORTH
SWARMS OF CREATURES." AND TO US, "BE FRUITFUL,
MULTIPLY." GOD DOES NOT CREATE ALONE.**

**GOD INVITES CREATION INTO THE VERY CREATING
PROCESS.**

**GOD INVITES CREATION TO BE CO-CREATORS WITH
GOD..... GOD SHARES GOD'S CREATIVE POWER WITH
THE WORLD FOR THE SAKE OF BRINGING ABOUT LIFE.**

**NOW LET ME ASK YOU A QUESTION: WHAT KIND OF A
RELATIONSHIP WOULD IT BE IF ONLY ONE PERSON HAD
ALL OF THE POWER? MAYBE YOU ARE DATING
SOMEONE IN SCHOOL OR YOU ARE MARRIED OR YOU
HAVE A BEST FRIEND. WHAT KIND OF A RELATIONSHIP
WOULD IT BE IF THAT PERSON HAD ALL OF THE POWER
AND YOU HAD NONE?**

IT WOULD NOT BE A STRETCH TO CALL THAT AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP..... ONE IN WHICH ONE PERSON IS POWERLESS. BUT WE LEARN IN GENESIS 1 THAT GOD IS ONE WHO *SHARES* POWER. GOD IS NOT ONE WHO HOLDS ALL OF THE POWER IN THE RELATIONSHIP.

NOW, IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO CONSIDER AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS..... BECAUSE EARLY HEARERS AND READERS OF GENESIS 1 WERE ISRAELITES WHO FOUND THEMSELVES IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP.....

**DURING THE BABYLONIAN EXILE, ABOUT THE 6TH
CENTURY BC – ABOUT 2,500 YEARS AGO THE
ISRAELITES WERE TAKEN FROM THEIR HOMES, THEIR
FAMILIES, THEIR JOBS AND HELD IN A FOREIGN LAND
AS SLAVES UNDER THE KING OF BABYLON.....**

**TO BE A SLAVE...TO BE POWERLESS..... IS TO BE TOLD
THAT YOU ARE WORTHLESS..... THAT YOU ARE NO
GOOD. THAT, IN FACT, YOU ARE SO USELESS THAT YOU
NEED SOMEONE ELSE TO USE YOU SO THAT YOU CAN
BE OF ANY VALUE.**

**THEY WERE IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THIS
KING OF BABYLON.....**

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU TO HEAR THAT WHILE YOU ARE BOUND IN SLAVERY AND FORCED TO WORK UNDER AND FOR THE KING OF BABYLON, TO HEAR THAT YOUR GOD SEEKS TO BRING LIFE OUT OF THE CHAOS THAT ALREADY EXISTS..... YOU, AS A SLAVE, ARE LIVING IN CHAOS AND YOU HEAR THAT YOUR GOD SEEKS TO BRING LIFE OUT OF THAT SAME CHAOS

AND NOT ONLY THAT, BUT THAT THIS GOD IS ONE WHO SHARES POWER WITH YOU, WANTING TO WORK BESIDE YOU, NEXT TO YOU, NOT OVER YOU, IN ORDER TO BRING ABOUT THAT LIFE.

IT MEANS THAT YOUR GOD IS NOTHING LIKE THE KING OF BABYLON..... IT MEANS THAT ALL THE THINGS YOU HAVE BEEN TOLD ABOUT YOURSELF, THAT YOU ARE WORTHLESS OR NO GOOD, ARE NOT TRUE..... IT MEANS THAT IN THE EYES OF GOD, YOU ARE NOT POWERLESS..... BUT THAT YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE POWER TO CREATE WITH GOD..... IT MEANS YOU DON'T LIVE YOUR LIFE OR EXIST ALONE..... IT MEANS THAT YOU HAVEN'T BEEN FORGOTTEN..... FOR THE ISRAELITE SLAVES, WHILE THEY MIGHT BE WORKING *FOR* THE KING OF BABYLON, THEY ARE WORKING *WITH* GOD. WORKING WITH GOD TO ENDURE A POWERLESS SITUATION. WORKING WITH GOD TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER WHILE IN THE FACE OF SUCH LOVELESSNESS.

THIS IS THE ISRAELITE EXILES GOD. AND THIS IS OUR GOD. GOD IS ONE WHO TAKES THAT WHICH ALREADY EXISTS AND SEEKS TO BRING LIFE OUT OF IT. AND NOT ONLY THAT, BUT THIS GOD INVITES CREATION – US –TO BE PARTICIPANTS, CO-CREATORS, IN THAT CREATION OF LIFE, FULLNESS OF LIFE, ABUNDANT LIFE.

GOD IS ALWAYS WANTING TO BRING ABOUT LIFE FOR THE SAKE OF THE BEST POSSIBLE FUTURE OF THE WORLD. BY BRINGING ABOUT LIFE, I DON'T MEAN SIMPLY PROCREATING, BUT TO BRING ABOUT LIFE IN THE WORLD IS TO BRING ABOUT LOVE. IT IS TO SEEK JUSTICE, AND NOT THE KIND OF JUSTICE WE ARE USED TO, IN WHICH YOU GET PUNISHED FOR WHAT YOU HAVE DONE.

NO, THE KIND OF JUSTICE IN WHICH EVERYONE HAS ENOUGH – ENOUGH LOVE, ENOUGH FOOD, ENOUGH SHELTER, ENOUGH RESPECT. IT IS IMPORTANT WORK FOR THE SAKE OF THE BEST POSSIBLE FUTURE. AND GOD INVITES US INTO THAT WORK *WITH* GOD.

ON THE WALL OF THE MUSEUM IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMP AT DACHAU IS A MOVING PHOTOGRAPH OF A MOTHER AND HER LITTLE GIRL BEING TAKE TO THE GAS CHAMBER AT AUSCHWITZ..... THE GIRL, WHO IS WALKING IN FRONT OF HER MOTHER, DOES NOT KNOW WHERE SHE IS GOING. THE MOTHER, WHO WALKS BEHIND, DOES KNOW, BUT THERE IS NOTHING, ABSOLUTELY NOTHING, THE MOTHER CAN DO TO STOP THIS TRAGEDY.

IN HER HELPLESSNESS, SHE PERFORMS THE ONLY ACT OF LOVE LEFT TO HER. SHE PLACES HER HAND OVER HER LITTLE GIRL'S EYES SO, AT LEAST, SHE WILL NOT HAVE TO SE THE HORROR WHICH FACES HER. GOD AND THIS GIRL'S MOTHER WERE WORKING TOGETHER THAT DAY..... TO BRING ABOUT THE LOVE THAT WAS POSSIBLE IN A HOPELESS SITUATION..... GOD IS ALWAYS WANTING BRING ABOUT NEW LIFE INTO THE WORLD..... THE ONLY LOVING THING LEFT TO DO WAS TO COVER HER DAUGHTER'S EYES.

GOD WORKS WITH THE STUFF OF THE WORLD, SEEKING TO BRING ABOUT AND CREATE THE BEST POSSIBLE FUTURE.

AND GOD CALLS US TO THIS WORK... WITH GOD.

BECAUSE GOD SO *VALUES* YOU THAT GOD WILL TRUST YOU WITH THE CREATIVE POWER TO HELP GOD BRING ABOUT LIFE IN THIS WORLD.

IN OUR GOSPEL READING FOR TODAY, JESUS IS BAPTIZED..... AND RIGHT AFTER HE IS BAPTIZED, HE IS SENT OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS. YOU REMEMBER WHAT THE WILDERNESS IS LIKE, DON'T YOU? UNKNOWN. DANGEROUS. CHAOTIC. AND THAT IS WHERE JESUS' MINISTRY TO THE WORLD BEGINS.

BUT BEFORE JESUS GOES THERE, JUST AS HE IS COMING UP OUT OF THE WATERS OF BAPTISM, GOD TEARS OPEN THE HEAVENS AND GIVES JESUS A BLESSING. “YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON, WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED.” GOD BLESSES JESUS BEFORE JESUS GOES OUT INTO HIS MINISTRY.

WE ARE ALL CALLED INTO THAT SAME MINISTRY. NOW, I CANNOT IMAGINE GOING INTO SUCH WORK WITHOUT BEING REMINDED OF GOD’S BLESSING UPON US.

**I FIND IT ONLY APPROPRIATE THAT WE TOO BE
BLESSED AS WE LOOK INTO ANOTHER YEAR IN WHICH
GOD WILL BE WORKING WITH US TO BRING ABOUT THE
BEST POSSIBLE FUTURE FOR GOD'S BELOVED WORLD.**

**SO REMEMBER THIS: YOU ARE GOD'S BELOVED
CHILD...WITH WHOM GOD IS WELL PLEASED.**

**PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND FOR
ME.....AMEN**