

Sheer Grace

Genesis 1:26-2:7

sermon digest

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larry dipboye

In the early Christian battle to define the Bible for future generations, Marcion, in the second Christian century, threw out the entire Old Testament with the judgment that the material world was created by an evil god who has absolutely nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth. According to historian Philip Schaff, "In his [Marcion's] view, Christianity has no connection whatever with the past, whether of Jewish or the heathen world, but has fallen abruptly and magically, as it were, from the heaven." (*History of the Christian Church*, II, 284) Like other heretics in the early church, Marcion did us a favor. Not only did he stir early Christians to defend three of our Gospels, Matthew, Mark and John, he challenged our connection to Hebrew roots and the Word of God in the Old Testament. The immediate Christian answer to Marcion was a profound, YES!. YES! Hebrew scriptures belong in our Bible. YES! The Hebrew faith lies at the foundation of Christian faith. YES! The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Maker of heaven and earth.

Christ has everything to do with creation. After eighteen centuries, Marcion continues to haunt us. The fringe Christian groups that have officially removed Hebrew scriptures from their Bibles are only a part of the problem. Although all major Christian denominations include the Old Testament, during Easter, they take their cue from Marcion. The Revised Common Lectionary in Protestant, Catholic and Episcopal variations have no Old Testament readings for the six Sundays following Easter with the exception of the traditional Psalm. True, Old Testament readings dominate the Easter Vigil on Easter Eve. Yes, a few denominations offer an alternative Old Testament lesson on Easter Sunday. To be sure, the Psalms are right out of Hebrew worship. Certainly the Hebrew witness is contained in the New Testament. I fully understand that the resurrection hope dawns late in Jewish history and that no Easter story can be found in Hebrew scriptures. And, I would agree that the church was born out of the Easter event.

So, what? What about the origin of life affirmed by the Old Testament stories of creation? The resurrection of Jesus Christ affirms God's gift of life from the genesis of life in the creation to the redemption of the world in the new creation. The God who gave life in the first place has continued the work of creation in the birth of every child in every human generation. The creation is not just about six days and a Sabbath. Creation continues until the world is finished. Early Hebrews identified death with dirt, the product of decomposition; and they connected living with breathing. The second story of creation pictures God forming *Adam*, the human person, out of the dirt, *adamah*. Then God breathed the breath of life into that clump of clay. Beginning with the God of creation, every breath is a gift from God. Through science, we have greatly expanded our understanding of the dynamics of life, but no one has improved on the picture of life at its source in the Creator God. All of life flows from a common source.

Today I choose take exception both to Marcion and the Revised Common Lectionary by deliberately and defiantly reading from Genesis on the third Sunday of Easter. The message of Genesis is consistent with the gospel of Christ. In John the story of Christ begins with creation. The divine *Logos*, the Word identified with Christ, was the Word by whom the world was called into existence at creation. The Epistles of Paul eloquently affirm the cosmic Christ, "the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created." Thus, "he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." (Col 1:15ff) In Christ the creation is inseparable from the resurrection. In contrast with the religions of Corinth: "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." (1 Cor. 8:6) Hebrews (1:2ff) proclaims the Son, "through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."

We live out of the blessings of creation. The biblical concept of *grace* stands in contrast with wages paid for service, or the legal *quid pro quo*, this for that. The creation is described as grace. God is not compelled by duty or indebtedness to give life. Life is grace. A few years ago the IRS required that offerings claimed as a tax deduction be clearly defined by the churches as *acts of grace*, by the statement, "no goods or services were provided to the donor in exchange for offerings."

Life is sheer grace. If you think differently, consider your own beginning. Just how much do you think you contributed to your conception, to your formation in the womb, or to the process of your own birth? We love to celebrate birthdays, but we seldom think about our total dependence on others for the gift of life at the point of birth. Extended throughout life, we are hard-pressed to claim total independence about any of our accomplishments.

Walter Brueggemann calls the opening story of creation a "Theology of Blessing." "Three times the term 'blessing' is used: of living creatures (v.22), of human creatures (v. 28), and of the sabbath (2:3)." This is a "creation liturgy" designed as an act of worship. It is also a refutation of false religion. The Genesis blessings are not found in ancient Near Eastern texts. The blessing of creation emerged out of the faith of Israel. God sent the world on its way with divine blessing, expecting the creation to live up to its good beginning. The picture of

creation presents a God who empowers and trusts. The Almighty does not grasp for power. Just as Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself. . . ,” (Philippians 2:6ff) the God of grace issues human life in trust that humanity will live up to the divine expectation. The drive to control which seems to be an essential human quality is inconsistent with the God of grace who is about the business of empowering and giving. Humans share the connection to the earth with all of life, but we have a unique tie to the Creator. Only the human is made in the image of God.

We are indebted to the source of our being. William Willimon recalls the family ritual of his teen years when he was about to leave home for a date or a party. The final blessing and the ultimate statement of parental wisdom as he went out the door was, “Remember who you are!” As I contemplate all of the parental advice that I have both received and given, I cannot think of any statement that is more appropriate. It overcomes the temptation to anticipate all of the choices that will be confronted for the evening, to give advance directives about what-to-do-if, and to issue a manual of legal instructions for growing up. It is a statement of trust which empowers youth with positive expectation. Rather than a lecture on the dangers and temptations of the world, youth are expected to be responsible and consistent with their roots. It reflects confidence about the values of home as well as confidence in the product of home. Finally, it is a statement of fact that reflects a wise understanding of the connection between being and doing. The stage is set for the important decisions in life from the day we are born. No greater statement of ethic has ever been devised: we live out of our roots. We reflect in our behavior not only ***who*** we are but ***whose*** we are.

Winner of the 1970 Nobel Prize for Literature, Alexander Solzhenitsyn received the Templeton award in London in 1983 for his contribution to spiritual dimension of life. In his acceptance speech, he recalled as a child hearing older people offering an explanation for the plight of their world, “People have forgotten God.” The great Russian author-philosopher offered his interpretation for the plight of the modern world, “People have forgotten God.”

If we forget our roots in the God of creation, we lose track of our identity, our debt to others and our responsibility to our Maker. Life disconnected from the root of creation is cheap, easily wasted. Even in the bright celebration of Easter, let us remember who we are. Remember God, who gave you life in the first place, who has given life anew in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.