

14 July 2024

I want you to think back to June of 2020 and worship at Lake Street. Unless you were Jennifer or Edna, Logan Wallace in the tech booth, or me you were joining worship from home. Since the first Covid shutdowns in March of that year, we had been pre-recording worship services and posting them on Facebook, but in June we began livestreaming the services in person, here, at 9am, with only a few of us in the building.

As I entered that strange period of preaching to three socially-distanced people, I decided to begin a project. I had already done an occasional Bible story-telling sermon series for a change of pace, but at this time – with no end to the pandemic in sight – I decided I would go from start to finish, telling the story of the Bible, and on June 7, 2020, I began with the story of Genesis 1-11. Now obviously I didn't just go straight through. I would do a section of scripture for six to eight weeks, then do something else for a few months before picking up the thread. And I didn't cover all the Bible, because not all the Bible is story. But I kept at it, and last Sunday, four years and 56 sermons later, we finished. So today, I just want to take some time and look back at where we've been.

The Bible Story Journey

*In a beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the way he did it matters. God did it intentionally and calmly and with delight. God spoke the earth into being, and like an artist stepping back to survey his work, God paused periodically to look it over and say, "Yeah, that's good." But God is not just an artist; God is a lover, because after everything else was created God made one kind of creature, called *adham*, male and female, in which he implanted a spark of his own artistry, the ability to appreciate and love God's creation as God does, and the ability to imagine God himself and love God back. God placed *adham* in a garden and stepped back to look. It was very good.*

*It didn't last, though. Love is only love if it is given freely, and so along with the ability to love God, *adham* was granted the ability to reject God and love only themselves. And so they did. They ate from the one fruit that God had forbidden, and in so doing they rejected their maker so as to more fully worship themselves. Having been made in God's image, they persuaded themselves that they could be gods too! God did not prevent their rebellion against him, nor did he stop them from experiencing the consequences of that rebellion, but God did not stop loving them.*

*Over the generations to follow, the race of *adham*, or humanity, continued rejecting God in horrible ways. They invented violence and murder, because when you worship yourself everyone else who also bears the image of God is perceived as a threat. They invented war and slavery and oppression and injustice, so as to show that they were better gods than others. But God continued loving them, finding in each new generation one person, or one family, who still tried to love God back. For the sake of those few, God did not give up on the many. Eventually, God found one wandering Semitic shepherd from the lands near the Euphrates River who loved God with depth, with fear and trembling, and God said, "I will start with this man, Abraham, and create a people who will know how to love me, and not just images of themselves, and that*

people shall become an example and a blessing for all *adham*.” God led Abraham to the land then known as Canaan, cut a covenant with him and with his heirs, and a new chapter in the history of the world began.

The promise to Abraham continued through his son Isaac, who was a weak man but God could work with weakness, and through Isaac’s son Jacob, who was a conniving man but God could work with that as well. God ended up re-naming Jacob “Israel,” which means “one who butts heads with God,” but God does not give up on people easily. Or ever. Israel had twelve sons, who all became founders of tribes, and God adopted those tribes as his special people, the nation of Israel, to become that promised blessing to all the earth.

The plan did not proceed smoothly, mind you. The tribes of Israel moved from Canaan to Egypt to escape a famine and then, over the ensuing centuries, became slaves there, serving the Pharaohs. But God did not forget his plan or the people he had chosen as his instruments, and when they cried out to God for help in their slavery, God sent an Israelite exile named Moses to lead them to freedom. Through displays of unimaginable power, God brought Egypt, the greatest empire on earth, to its knees, and Moses led the people out of Egypt into the broken mountain lands of the Sinai. There, on Mount Sinai, God reaffirmed his covenant with Abraham and added to it. He gave Moses a law that the people were to follow, a law that called for them to worship only God, to honor that God by never reducing him to an image or taking him lightly, but also to honor each other by respecting each other’s lives and property. And God added this, “Remember who I am. I am the one who heard your cry when you were in distress. I will always hear the cry of the distressed, and if you abuse or harm those who are without protection, I will be on their side, and you will know my wrath.”

Moses and his successor Joshua led the people through the desert and back into the land that God had given to Abraham. With God’s power behind them, the people of Israel reclaimed that land and divided it among their twelve tribes, establishing the nation of Israel. Even in that nation, God’s plan was made plain, for God commanded the Israelites to be a nation unlike any other, a nation held together by their common worship of God and their loyalty to each other. They would have no kings; God would be their king. It worked for a while, so long as Israel remembered to trust in God, but eventually, their trust grew thin, as it does when it is not exercised. The people went to their leader – a priest and seer and judge named Samuel – and demanded a king, so they could be like other nations. It was not what God had intended for them, but once again God could work with rebellious, and he was patient. He gave them a king named Saul, and when that one began to think more about his own dignity than about serving God and the people entrusted to him, God raised up another one, another Semitic shepherd, named David, who was both a warrior and a singer of praise to God.

Now, David would also turn out to be, at different times, an adulterer, a murderer, and a pathetic excuse for a father, but God could work even with that, and he reaffirmed his covenant with Abraham and Israel and added to it by declaring that so long as they were willing to return to God, David’s line would never end. Over the next couple of centuries, though, the kingdom of Israel increasingly turned away from God’s covenants – all of them. The tribes divided and fought against each other; many kings and people turned away from worshiping God and began worshiping empty images that reflected the worst parts of humanity. As always, though, God clung to a few faithful worshipers in the hope that people might yet turn back to the one who loved them.

Some of these few faithful worshipers were called *prophets*. These faithful ones spoke forcefully and poetically, through dreams and stories and songs, calling Israel back to God. Some were banished. Some were beaten or imprisoned. Some were killed. All were ignored. One of those prophets, named Jeremiah, declared that God's patience with the kingdom of Israel would not last forever, that God could destroy that land and send the Israelites into exile. No one listened, so God did exactly as Jeremiah had promised. The nation of Israel was wiped out, and the few who survived went into exile in the lands of the Babylonian Empire.

But even though God allowed the people to suffer the consequences of their own rebellion – stop me if you've heard this before – God did not stop loving them or give up on his plan for them to bless all the world. Prophets speaking from exile declared that God would bring the people back from Babylon as he had delivered them before from Egypt, and that God would establish a new covenant, a covenant in which God would bear the weight of the people's rejection and would forgive them and restore them so that they would be a light to the nations. And so it happened. This time God used no mighty works at all, no massive displays of power, and still delivered the people from exile. The Babylonian Empire crumbled like a house of cards before the breath of the Persian Empire, and the new rulers allowed the Israelites to return.

By now you probably have come to recognize the historical pattern. It is the same as the individual pattern of our own faith: we turn to God and are blessed, upon which we begin to think that our blessing is the result of our own worthiness, that in fact we are the gods of our own fate. And then everything falls apart, we realize we were vain and ignorant again, we cry out to God, who forgives us, and we start over. And so it was again with the Israelites. Yes, they were back in the promised land, but it was *hard* now. They no longer ruled themselves, but were insignificant subjects of a series of empires: the Persians, the Greeks, and then the Romans. And whatever happened to that promise that David's line would never end, and where was that new covenant that Jeremiah and the other prophets had promised?

And then God did the most amazing thing of all, something undreamt of even by the prophets, beyond the imagination of any seer. In a tiny village called Bethlehem – which had been the birthplace of David as well – a young woman named Mary, whose husband was a descendent of David, bore a child. But while that child was borne by *adham*, he was conceived by the Breath of God. God, the creator of the earth, was born into it; the power behind the universe became a helpless infant. If *adham* was not going to find a way back to God, then God would find the way to *adham*, open the road, build the bridge, throw open the gate, and light the path. This child of Mary was named Jesus, and when he grew to adulthood, he went out among the descendants of Abraham, the people of Israel, teaching them. He reminded them of their covenant, and he reminded them that god was the one who heard the cry of the helpless. But Jesus did not just teach the descendants of Abraham; Jesus also taught those beyond Israel, for that Abrahamic covenant had always been intended as a blessing for all nations. Jesus walked the earth as one who loved, whose delight was in mercy and compassion for others, a man for whom it was the very breath of life to raise up the trampled and to forgive the unforgiveable. He told stories, for he was still an artist at heart, and for a few brief years, *adham* had a glimpse of what the first *adham* had been created to become.

But such blinding revelation was too much for those who had learned to thrive in the darkness, and so Jesus was arrested, tried, condemned, beaten, and killed in the most painful and humiliating way possible. Perhaps it was inevitable. Since the first *adham*, we have tried so hard

to worship ourselves as gods that we do not easily recognize the real thing. *Adham* set out to extinguish God's light, so as to be left alone in our familiar deathshadow. But God did not stop loving us, nor did God give up on his plan, because on the third day after Jesus was killed, he rose again from the dead. Before God's determination to love, death itself shrinks into an insignificant crumpled ball and blows away in the wind. The God who has loved from the very beginning, has every intention of loving without end.

In one sense this is the end of the story, for everything we told before this was resolved in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But in another sense it is the beginning a new story, and the Bible continues with the first chapter of that new story. During his life on earth, Jesus had gathered men and women around him, teaching them the new thing that God was doing. They were weak and not very clever and stubborn and cowardly at times, but that was nothing God had not dealt with before, and after Jesus' resurrection, those followers began to figure out who he had been and what that meant now. They began describing how Jesus, from the line of David, was indeed the new covenant that had been promised, the fulfillment of every covenant. Then they began taking that story not just to the descendants of Abraham but as a gift and blessing to all the world. One of them, named Paul – who was himself another of God's reclamation projects – described in rapture how he had come to realize that there is no power or authority on earth, or in any earth, that could stand in the way of God's love. And another one, named John, described a vision that he had been given, a revelation of what is to come. In that vision, he described a new garden, like the one the first *adham* had spoiled, a place where all is light and music and life and beauty in the presence of God. John ends that vision with these words, *The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' Let everyone who hears say 'Come.' Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let everyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.... Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints.*

Amen.