



From Genesis to Revelation

TEXT
John 1:1-5

January 1, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Over the next couple of months, I want us to look at some confusing and sometimes difficult passages in the Bible. It's an old book, written thousands of years ago, in a different culture. So it requires some interpretation.

Why would Paul counsel women to be silent in church? What is that about? Why would the ancients pray that the children of their enemies be brutally murdered? When it says, "Jesus is the only way to the Father," what does that mean for people who are not part of the church?

At the same time, it has been the experience of those who read these ancient words to find holy wisdom, a light for our path.

Today I want to try to tell you the story of the Bible. I will, no doubt, leave out a few parts.

It begins with the Spirit hovering over the deep. Nothing but chaos, but then God speaks. God said, "Let there be ... light and life," and there was. Once God speaks, life is possible. This is not a science story that tells the "how" of creation. This is a love story

that affirms that there is no life apart from God's word.

God created *Adam*, the Hebrew word that means "humankind." So this — like all the stories in this book — is our story too. Adam is created by God, cared for by God, instructed by God. *You can eat it all, but don't eat that. It's not good for you.* But Adam and Eve, they know better. That's the point. God tells them how to live in this world, but they know better. We all think we know better.

Sin against God always results in sin against brothers and sisters. Cain kills Abel. But that is just an illustration of how brothers and sisters will treat each other in God's world.

God looks down on his creation, and it makes him sick. He tries to wash away the iniquity with a flood. The flood doesn't change humanity, but it does change God. *Never again*, God says.

This might be the point where God chooses to give up, to wash God's hands of the world, but we will learn that God can't do that.

So God picks a man named Abraham. This would begin the relationship with the Hebrew people. God calls Abraham and

says, "You are blessed to be a blessing. ... Through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Even in this moment of choosing a particular people through whom to work redemption, redemption is intended for "all the families of the earth."

The struggle for people of faith — then and now — has always been to remember that the blessing of faith is never for our benefit alone.

The call of Abraham was vague. "Leave your father's house, your kindred, your home and go to the land that I will show you." In other words, leave life as you have understood it, leave life as you have defined it, and go to life as I define it. And all Abraham had was a word. But he went.

God's promise to Abraham would include descendants, but they would not come easily. There was Ismael, and after time and painful testing, there was Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and then Joseph and his brothers, who became 12 tribes of Israel. The stories of these families in Genesis make you feel better about your own family, no matter how dysfunctional it may be. You probably haven't sold your brother into slavery.

The descendants of Abraham would find themselves in Egypt, slaves of the ancient Pharaoh. Oppressed, they cry out to God. And God hears their cry and raises up Moses, who leads them across the Red Sea: The Exodus is a defining moment in Israel's history — one that shows God to be a liberating God, a God who hears the cries of the oppressed.

The Exodus would lead to that difficult time we call “the wilderness wanderings.” For a generation, they wandered in the wilderness. It was there in the wilderness on Mount Sinai that God would give the Ten Commandments. This was a gift. The commandments not only provide instruction on how to live life, but they show us how to respond to God in gratitude once God has touched us with grace. This is what you do with your life.

Joshua would lead them into the land that God had promised. There they would be ruled by judges. Deborah, Gideon and Samson were among the judges.

But Israel saw other nations had kings, and they wanted to be like other nations. That's always a struggle for people of faith: How are we like others, and how are we different from others? What sets us apart? God was their king, but they wanted a human king, so Saul was anointed king. Then David followed and was forever seen as the king to be remembered and the king to be hoped for. Israel would always yearn for a king to rule over them in jus-

tice and righteousness ... that king they called the Messiah. After King David, Solomon followed. He built the temple.

The temple would be the center of the universe; the throne of God was in the temple. The worship of God was not casual.

After Solomon's reign, Israel divided into two kingdoms: north and south. There would be tension between them — a series of kings in the northern kingdom, another series of kings in the southern kingdom. Some kings were faithful, but not many. The problem with kings is that with all that power, it was hard to remember God's word. They learned again, there is no life apart from God's word.

So God sent prophets. Elijah and Elisha came. Nathan was the prophet to King David. Later would come what we call the literary prophets: Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea and others. They were men of words and men of God's word. They were poets more than anything else. Sometimes prophets are misunderstood as those who could predict the future, but the gift of the prophets is that they could see the present. They could see what was really going on right now, and they named it.

Usually, they had two concerns. They reminded God's people not to be casual about worship. They often said, *You have assumed that God has blessed you for yourself alone. That's too small.*

And the prophets were adamant that God was concerned

for the poor. God is not casual about poverty. God cares for God's children from the bottom up.¹ When people are poor, it is not just a statement about them; it reveals that the community is broken. That has not always been a national value, but it has always been a biblical value.

These prophetic poets reminded Israel that they couldn't live without the word of God; they couldn't be Israel without the word of God. It's a hard lesson to learn.

So ... Israel would crumble. First the northern kingdom would fall to the Assyrians. And the ten tribes of the north would be scattered across the Assyrian empire. Then 150 years later, and 500 years before Christ, the southern kingdom would fall to the Babylonians. Jews would be marched into exile, where they would be captive for a generation.

Exile raised theological questions. Had God finally given up on Israel? Was this the time that God would say, *I've had enough? I wash my hands of you* — for they knew Israel had forgotten the word and the way. When we turn from God, there are consequences. But they also learned that God would not give up.

God never judges to settle scores; judgment always gives birth to redemption. Judgment isn't followed by grace; judgment is grace.

So from the prophets, we hear again of God's dreams for God's creation. The prophetic dreams were not small: the lion lying down with the lamb;

swords beaten into plowshares; the law of God being written on the heart so that all of God's children would live like God's children. They never let go of those dreams.

Cyrus the Persian told the Babylonian captives they would go home. They returned to Israel, carrying with them the dreams of the prophets.

And then things seemed quiet for a long time. Almost 400 years passed without a prophet from God, until a baptizing preacher named John strode through the wilderness, proclaiming that the final work of redemption, the kingdom of God, was near.

Like the spirit that moved over the deep and whispered creation, the spirit moves again over an unknown Galilean teenage girl named Mary and brings new creation. This part of the story you may know best.

One of the favorite ways the church would describe Jesus is they said he was the living Word. The Word we had known from the beginning was now in skin: the Word became flesh.

Jesus would talk of the kingdom of God and tell stories of seeds and weeds and surprisingly good Samaritans. He captured people's imagination, and he captured people's hearts. His followers sensed the spirit of God in him in a way they had not seen in anyone else. It was clear to them that this was not a new spirit. It was the same spirit that had moved over creation, and had spoken Torah, had met them in

the temple and had inspired the prophets. It was the same spirit, but they had never known the Spirit in this fashion. They came to confess that he was the Son of God.

Like Abraham, who was asked to leave life as he had known it and go to a land that God would show them, Jesus too called followers to leave life as they had known it and follow him to a new kingdom.

He taught them to pray ... and to care for one another ... and to see the world as he sees the world. They did their best.

But God's kingdom is not like our ways, and so it wouldn't matter when or where Jesus might have shown up; any nation, any people, any generation would want to kill him.

It did not surprise Jesus. He predicted it. Facing the love of power with the power of love, he redeemed even the most evil aspects of this world. His death was not a tragedy, but the moment that revealed that God would stop at nothing to redeem the creation God so loved.

The world rejected this holy love and crucified him, and we may think that God would at last say, "I've had enough. If this is what you want, you've got it. I'm finished with you." But no, Jesus came back. "He is risen," as they said.

And the risen one began to show up in his followers. They formed communities that reflected his life and teaching. Women were respected. Slaves were welcomed. The poor were

not the recipients of mission, but became members of the family.

Much of the New Testament consists of letters — letters written by various leaders to these early, small congregations. These letters dealt with ordinary issues of how one lives as a Christian in the market, or in worship, or at work, or with family. And they dealt with the most significant issues, like "How do we face suffering that is the direct result of trust in Jesus?" The issues change over time, but we, too, wonder how we live in a way that demonstrates our trust in Jesus.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus did not bring to completion the dreams of the old prophets, but he did show us what they look like. So the followers of Jesus continue to live toward that promised day.

The Bible ends with a promise. We call it Revelation. It is a word of hope for people in their worst moments — moments that might cause us to wonder if God has finally chosen to let go of us. Revelation declares that this world is no accident, and you are never insignificant. The fullness of God's love will be known by one and all; so do not be afraid, but live toward God's promised day.

This is the story of the Bible. It is a story of a God who will stop at nothing to redeem the creation God loves.

It is a story of ordinary people: Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Samuel, Amos and Martha, Joseph of Arimathea

and James. The names continue through history and now include your names. This story lives in people.

It also is a story that is carried by word — like Abraham, who had nothing more than a promise: “a land I will show you.”

Like Peter, James and John, who had nothing more than a promise: “Come and follow me.”

We have nothing more than a promise: “The kingdom is coming.”

It is a word that will be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path; a word that will be our home. These words do not simply name what is real. These words construct a world in which life is real.

Eugene Peterson has said, “We must be careful with our words. We begin by using them, but they end up using us.”² We would do well to remember the importance of words these days.

Learn these words. Learn this story. Carry it with you, and let it provide the lens through which you engage the world. This book will construct a world in which you can live life abundantly.

¹This is a statement influenced by a line in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *The Poisonwood Bible*.

²In an interview with Krista Tippett for *On Being*, December 22, 2016

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.