

September 20, 2009  
The National Presbyterian Church

## In Our Favor

Genesis 1:26-31; Ephesians 1:3-10

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Rev. Earl F. Palmer

**T**he Old Testament is a narrative story of real people in a real place. Next week we meet Abraham, who is the founder/father of that people, the Israelites, who journey throughout this book and prepare us for the fulfillment of their journey. It's the story before the grand story. It's the next to the last word prior to the last word. The last word is that morning in history when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. We'll celebrate that at Advent in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in Bethlehem of Judea. But this is the story that prepares us for it.

And so this series of sermons present a New Testament understanding of that Old Testament story, that Old Testament history. It begins with an epic account of the creation of everything. Moses as he begins this book, starts it with God speaking. That is so significant. It is even philosophically and scientifically significant, that before creation is idea, is truth, is meaning, is information. God spoke. He said, "Let there be light." And the use of the word "day," which is used seven times, is not employed in a restricted chronological 24-hour sense, but in a theological sense like we see elsewhere in the Bible where we read for instance "a day with the Lord is like a thousand elsewhere." It's used that way. Day one, through six, but the use of the word "day" shows that creation occurs within time. The creation of everything, light itself, day, night, the earth, the oceans, the animal kingdom, the life of the sea, man and woman themselves, are within time,

and that's the Genesis narrative, the fact, the "that" of creation. We receive the mandate to figure out how it happens. God announces in the Genesis account, that it happens. At the close of each day appears this interesting word, God saw it and called it "good." This Hebrew word *tove* is the first of the love words in the Bible. God loves his creation. It is the beginning of the love vocabulary of the Bible. He saw it and called it good. Day One, Day Two, Day Three, Day Four, Day Five, Day Six and day six means the most to us because in that day the whole animal kingdom is created. And we are created, too, in that day. Listen to the way it's put in Genesis: "Then God said, let us make [your *New RSV* text says "humankind" but the actual Hebrew word is let us make *Adam*. *Adam* then becomes the generic word for man/woman, and you'll see that's exactly how it's used.] "Let us make *Adam* in our image, according to our likeness and let them" – now suddenly the word *Adam* becomes plural – "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the cattle and over all the wild animals of earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." Dominion. So God created Adam in his image, in the image – that means the imprint, that's why we make use of the Latin *imageo deo*, we're created in the imprint of God. Nothing else in creation is that said of, and yet, we have a continuity with everything else in the Sixth Day. So God created Adam in his image, in the image of God he created them, "male and female he created them."

And then he blessed us; he told us to multiply and to have dominion over the earth, and then at the end of the Sixth Day, this great line appears: "And so God saw everything that he had made and indeed it was very good." And there was evening and there was morning the Sixth Day. We looked at that last week, this dominion and the boundary. We dwell in the Sixth Day, we're not in the Seventh Day, that's next. The Seventh Day is the Day without an ending, that belongs to God. We're in the Sixth Day. We're in the day with the rest of the created order. Nothing in the created order is eternal. There is a boundary around it, an outer greater boundary. But within that, we are given a dominion. Dominion within boundary. In the New Testament text that was read to you just a few minutes ago, St. Paul in the Ephesians text picks this up when he says we are destined in love. We were destined in love. God created us in love. That is good news. Then you might say that this word to us is good news right at the beginning of the Genesis account. The Sixth Day has its ending. Then there's

another boundary that's added in the next chapter. In chapter two, one more boundary is added, a moral, spiritual boundary is added to this Sixth Day boundary, our mortality boundary. This second boundary is added in chapter two. "So the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden." Now we get a brief and fleeting picture of this strange Garden of Eden. By the way, man will not be there very long. But he's there in the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it. "And the Lord God commanded the man, you may eat freely of every tree in the garden, but of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, you shall not eat it. When you do, you will die."

The tree becomes symbolic, really, of God's decision in our favor. He puts man/woman in the Sixth Day; he makes us mortal. We're not gods, in fact the temptation to eat the fruit of the tree will be a temptation for man to become God. But God says no to that possibility. You are man, woman and trust me, that is in your favor. And so he gives us now that second boundary that reminds us of the fact that we're in the Sixth Day and reminds us that we're not to cross over into the Seventh Day. But in the next chapter of Genesis, the third chapter, the Garden becomes a troubled garden. An adversary appears who tempts man/woman. Think about it for a minute. If we were given dominion, freedom, and that's the beginning of the freedom teaching in the Bible, then with freedom because of its nature we can be tempted. Man/woman can be tempted. And so we're tempted. It's interesting, you'll see in the temptation with regard to that tree and that fruit, we're tempted from two sources. From within, in that man/woman saw the fruit and it was desirable. We desired it. We are also tempted from without. And that's the strange and mysterious temptation from cosmic evil, from the devil symbolized by the serpent.

We're tempted to distrust God. Listen to what the serpent says. "The serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God." That's the temptation, and man/woman desire it. Who wouldn't? Who wouldn't want to be God? That's the temptation. Bonhoeffer, in his commentary on this passage says, we were meant to live from the center, and that was good.<sup>1</sup> God called that good. But the temptation that happens in the Garden, is the temptation of our desire to live at the center. We were meant to live from the center, not at the center. St. Augustine in his comments on this passage says that the

temptation of Adam and Eve is the temptation to enter the Seventh Day on our own terms, the day that has no ending, the everlasting day that belongs to God. And that's the symbolism of the Seventh Day. It belongs to God as his gift to give, not ours to seize. We're boundaried by time. We're not immortal. And so the temptation is to try to enter in the Seventh Day. So man/woman submit to that desire, the desire from within and also the temptation from outside as well. That is called The Fall.

As a result of that, man/woman are evicted from the Garden. And from this time forward nowhere else in the journey will we ever return to the Garden. We leave the Garden no longer innocent and our journey that we will track in the Old Testament and the New Testament, is not a journey to return to the Garden of innocence. It's a journey toward the City of God, from the Garden to the City. When we get to chapter 22 of the book of Revelation we'll meet another tree; it's interesting what that tree is called in the center of the city where the Lamb is. It's a Tree for the Healing of the Nations. The tree with leaves for the healing of the people. So we're going to move from innocence towards redemption. And that's going to be the journey that we will track all the way through Old Testament and New Testament. The journey from broken innocence, toward a new, and actually a profoundly better place, the place of redemption.

So man with a bad choice with his freedom loses both himself and his choices. Painful addictions journey along with our desires. Our desires begin to dominate us. They take us over, whether we have a desire for money or a desire for power. That desire mars us; it distorts us, because we distrusted God and that is the result that follows our own decision to distrust God. It's funny when we think of it that that boundary that God gave us was really in our favor. I titled today's sermon "In Our Favor." It was in our favor. It's just that our desires ran rampant, unchecked, disregarding the boundary God gave to us. Let me suggest a parable. We're in football season right now. How I love it, especially West coasters are really reveling in football this weekend, because our school where I live in Seattle, the University of Washington Huskies, that *The Washington Post* called an 'unranked team,' defeated USC yesterday, the third-ranked team in America. The lowly Huskies won that wonderful game fair and square. My own school, the University of California, beat Minnesota. I mean, it's just been a glorious day for most of the West in football.

Football is a great game in every way. Supposing I were on a college team and I said to my teammates, “Hey, you guys, I have got a play. This is sure to get us a touchdown. I’ve got a great trick play. We can put it into the third quarter. It’s a surprise play. That’s good in football, isn’t it? A surprise play that’ll take everybody by surprise. Here’s my play – we give the ball to the quarterback and it’s maybe third down and eleven, it’s going to be a long hard play. But he will take the ball and throw it to the sidelines where my sister Mildred is going to be waiting in the sidelines. I got it all worked out with her. He’ll throw the ball to Mildred. Mildred will run down the sidelines behind, you know, behind the other players that are lined up. She’ll run down and the tight end will go down on the side and then she’ll flip the ball in to the tight end and then he’ll go in for the touchdown. What a play! That is a surprise play, but of course, we who love football each week all know that there are four men with striped shirts on the field. They have flags for these kinds of plays. God is, in a sense, Heaven’s striped shirt at one point here in the Garden of Eden narrative. He’s going to rule the play out. He’s going to say, ‘No, you will surely die with that play.’

That play won’t work. It’s an illegal play. You cannot throw the ball to members of the band. Stanford tried that in one game. You cannot throw the ball to people out in the grandstands and have them throw it back into the field. You can’t do it. It’s just not the game. The game has boundaries. And the boundaries are in favor of the game. Do you see that? It’s not a favor to the team to have an illegal play, because the striped shirt will call it dead, because it’s not according to the game. Have you ever watched boys and girls make a sandlot football game or a soccer game? Notice the first thing they do is establish the boundaries, to establish where the goal line is, to establish where out-of-bounds is. You have to do it or you cannot have a game. And that’s what God says to Adam and Eve and then says to them, “Trust me, I’ve set a boundary here that works for you.” It’ll be better for you to stay a human being than to try to be a God. When you try to be God and you’re going to be in trouble especially when you meet some other people that think they’re God. Be a human being. That’s what I called good. When Adam and Eve gave way to temptation not to trust God, that became the first sin.

That really is what sin is at its core. Human sin is distrusting the faithfulness of God and his love. In the fourth chapter there are two brothers, Cain and Abel. Cain is frustrated religiously because he thinks his offering is not

as good as Abel's. The Lord tells him, 'Don't worry Cain, it'll be alright, don't be tempted.' Cain doesn't listen to the Lord and he is tempted. He kills his brother Abel, thinking that then he'll be on top. Instead the Lord shows up in the Garden and says "Cain, where is your brother?" And the famous line comes from Cain, "What? Am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord says, "Yes, and his blood is crying out from the earth." Now we hear for ourselves that wonderful truth about justice and truth, that God holds us accountable. And so Cain in his rebellion now becomes even more hurtful than Adam and Eve eating an apple.

So it's a tragic story. And we're out of the Garden of Eden. As we read the Old Testament and New Testament, we're going to watch a new journey unfold. We're going to watch it unfold in the Old Testament narratives. Yet, in this story there is a mystery at work and it's this mystery I want us to think about now. There is a mystery, and do you know what that mystery is? That even our bad choices (and Adam and Eve made a bad choice, Cain made a horrible choice) even our bad choices and the bad use of our dominion does not take away God's freedom and our freedom remains too. There is a great line from Karl Barth; he says we must not do any harm to our choice, but no harm must be done to God's choice either.<sup>2</sup> God is free. He is not disarmed by our sins. He's not disarmed by the sin of Adam and Eve or of Cain. His love is still there. When Adam and Eve are evicted from the Garden they are clothed by God as a mark of his love. And even Cain, when Cain is sent out into the world as a sojourner, a mark is put on Cain. Not a mark of judgment. It's a mark of grace so that he'll be protected.

God's love does not end. That's a mystery. All we, like sheep, have gone astray, and yet God keeps track of us. Think of it. God is so sure of himself that he's willing to grant freedom to us. What a risk he's taken. he's so sure of himself that he's willing to grant us a real dominion in which we can make choices both good and bad that affect the earth both for good and for bad, and we each know some of the wrong choices we have made that affect the earth. We do make bad choices. And yet, God is not disarmed. He is so sure of himself and his own sovereignty that he provides freedom around him. That is amazing. I thought of it this way as a kind of analogy. Think of a ranch that has cattle on it; what if the ranch was so extensive that the cattle could not go off the ranch? I understand there's a ranch in Texas called the King Ranch where that's the story – it's so big someone said it's as big as the state of Rhode Island; so therefore, you could not really go off the

ranch. God's ranch is big too. God is so sure of himself that we can't really go beyond the ranch. We can do a lot of things and go astray on the ranch, but we can't really get off of it. And that's how sure he is of himself that he can provide that kind of freedom for us so that we are able to make a lot of terrible mistakes but we can't really go off the whole ranch, astray beyond where his eye can see.

That's how sure God is of himself that he grants you and me a genuine, a real freedom. But then I have a second question. Then how does he gather us together? How does he get us together? How does he find us if we can just go adrift and go in every direction, which we can? How does he find us? How does he draw us together? Did you hear the text in Ephesians 1:3-14? St. Paul tells us that God "destined us in love." And then toward the end of that text Paul says that it is "part of God's eternal plan to gather all things to himself, to the glory of Jesus Christ." All things. Well, how does God do that? How does he gather all the cattle? If they can go in every direction, how does he gather them? I was sharing once at a Bible study the fact that God is so sure of himself that he doesn't fence in his property. He provides real freedom for we human beings. And I asked the question: "Well then, how does he gather the people?" And a friend of mine had just come back from Australia, and he said, you know, I've been in the Outback of Australia and in the Outback there are ranches there that are so large that they are not fenced. He said, I found out how the Australian cattlemen bring their sheep or their cattle together. You know how they do it? With wells. With water, and salt licks, and a place where food is. The cattle gather by the wells. I thought to myself, that's exactly how the Gospel will draw you together. Jesus Christ will win you and me with his love, his living water, (John 4). "I am the Bread of Life." (John 6) "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden." (Matthew 11) He draws us together with the Gospel. He doesn't cause a constricting fence to force us together.

Martin Luther put it this way: "If men are converted out of fear, they will later hate their conversion."<sup>3</sup> But we're not converted because of fear. We're converted because of grace, by the Lord who finds us, the God who is able to find us. And that's a story we will watch unfold in all these weeks ahead of us, the God who knows how to find us. Has he found you? Have you been found? My guess is if you've been found, it's because you've been fed. You've found water that's better than your own desires that you thought were what you wanted. You tried a trick play by throwing the ball

outside the lines to Mildred, and it was such an exciting play because it took everybody by surprise, even the press cameras couldn't follow it because they weren't aiming in that direction. But the referees caught it, and ruined it all. Have you tried that with your life, with your finances or your moral choices, or your feelings about yourself? You tried to create your own destiny beyond God's boundaries. It didn't work. And then you got hungry, and you found out that there was a true source of life, and then you were found.

When this sermon is over our choir will sing a choral response. I am deeply moved by this choral response. It is from Thomas Troger's poem:

*A line, a limit and God's law are patterns meant to help us draw.  
A bound between what life requires and all the things our heart desires.  
We're not free when we're confined to every wish that sweeps our mind,  
but we're free when freely we accept the sacred bounds that must be kept.*

What a text. God finds us.

Heavenly Father, thank you that you can find us and that you know how to find us. You know our names. You know that we tend to go astray, and with bad choices our dominion sometimes is hurtful to others. And sometimes we do good things with our dominion for which we're grateful too. But Lord, we're grateful that you're able to find us. Our bad choices do not cancel your freedom. You are able to find where we are and to heal us. Thank you for that. May we experience it. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Creation and Fall*. Augsburg Fortress 1997; Fortress Press 2007; originally published by Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1988. Original English-language edition of *Creation and Fall* published in 1959 by SCM Press Ltd. and in 1965 by Macmillan Publishing Company.

2 Barth, Karl. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Oxford University Press (6th edition), 1968.

3 Luther, Martin. *Commentary on Romans*. Zondervan Publishing, 1954. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976.

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*Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.  
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

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