

National Presbyterian Church

February 12, 2017

Some Good News and Some Bad News

Genesis 3:8-24, 1Corinthians 1:18-25

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In our sermon series this winter we're looking together at the *Apostles' Creed* (www.creeds.net), one of the most important summaries of the Christian faith across the world for the last 1700 years or so.

The Creed shares with us some "Amazing Good News"

- That there is a God: the Father Almighty
- Who made us, and who loves us
- Who chose to create us in his image, to be like God: we have the ability to choose and create, with potential for enormous good, and yet we are also accountable for our choices: *we are not* mere puppets on a string.

And this sense of accountability is crucial for understanding *our identity and dignity*.

Sometimes we love and honor people by giving them what they need — no strings attached: the need is so enormous. But over the long haul everyone involved in ministries of caring knows that if recipients are never held to account, never called to responsibility at some level, so that gentle love is complemented with tough love, then love and charity can become toxic, creating more harm than good — creating a loss of dignity rather than restoring it.

(So, e.g., with refugee ministry it is critical that after 12 months, churches equip family entrusted to their care to make it on their own)

So God the Father Almighty shows his love for us first by creating the universe and then by creating us in his image.

And not only that, but what the creed teaches us is that God demonstrates and proves this love by "staging an invasion" of the universe He created. In other words, God the Creator enters our world in flesh and blood in the person of Jesus to walk in our shoes, to let us know that he knows *what it's like to be human*, not just at its best, but at its worst.

And this act is not cheap. He *not only* takes on and experiences the limitations of flesh and blood (being born as a helpless baby), but, as we saw last Sunday, he experiences suffering, and even torture and death. This is what the Creed says:

I believe in God the Father Almighty Maker of heaven and earth.
And In Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost (same as the Holy Spirit),
and born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified dead and buried, and descended into hell

The word "Hell" here, in the original Latin and Greek literally it means the "*lower regions*." And the point is simply to emphasize that Jesus experienced Death in all its horror: not just physical pain, but spiritual pain; the full brunt of evil; all the pain and suffering and evil that the world could throw at him

And why? Well to begin with to show us, that no matter what we experience, that God’s love and reach knows no limits in its humility and courage and persistence to share it with us. And this is the repeated teaching of the Bible:

So the writer t the Hebrews in the Bible says:

4: 15 We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in ***every respect has been tested as we are***, yet without sin.

And First John in the Bible says:

3:16 We know love by this, that he ***laid down his life*** for us

And the Apostle Paul in Romans says (5.8)

God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners ***Christ died for us***.

And this knowledge was of enormous comfort and inspiration

To the early church when they suffered — as suffer they did:

The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians

(2 Cor.5.14) the love of Christ (*the example of Christ’s suffering and death*) urges us on, (*not to quit*) because we are convinced that one has died for all. (*If he didn’t quit for me, how can I quit*)

And to the Romans, Paul writes:

(Rom. 8.35, 39) I am convinced that nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God made known in (*the suffering and death of*) Christ Jesus our Lord. (*Nothing can tear us apart from this love*)

In fact, saying God “loves us” sometimes doesn’t really cut it — we’ve said it too often for it to be powerful. Maybe, with St. Valentine’s Day around the corner, it would be more powerful — and true — to say that God adores us!!

This is a truth that really needs to sink in. In the case of poet Maya Angelou for her to see this, someone ***had to force her to stop***, and take stock, and let it sink in. This is what she writes (in her book Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now) — a story I’ve shared before):

In my twenties in San Francisco, I became a sophisticate, an acting agnostic. It wasn’t that I stopped believing in God. It’s just that God didn’t seem to be around the neighborhoods that I frequented.

One day, my voice teacher asked me to read from Lessons in Truth, a section which ended with these words, “God loves me.”

I read it and closed the book and my teacher said, “Read it again.”

I pointedly opened the book and sarcastically read, “God loves me.”

He said, “Read it again.” *After about the seventh repetition, I began to sense that there might be truth in this statement*, that there was a possibility that God really did love me. Me! Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all.

I knew that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things. I could try great things, learn anything, achieve anything — for what could stand against me and God.

That knowledge humbles me. That knowledge melts my bones, closes my ears, makes my teeth rock loosely in their gums. It liberates me.

And it continued to do so for the rest of her life. **That's the message of the Creed:** the message of *Creation and Incarnation, and of the Suffering and Death of Christ* that we need to hear, and let sink in.

Incredible, grand, empowering **Good** News. **But** — sad to say — *not all the news* is “good.”

There's some Bad News, too, inherent in this message! Bad news which is also fundamental to our understanding of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross.

Let me put it like this. God would surely not have had to go to such extreme lengths to show us his love *if there hadn't been something really wrong* — with us and God's creation!

Think of a fireman entering a burning house. If there's no one inside, who needs saving, then going into the house when a fire is raging is **not** an act of *humility and courage and love* at all! Rather, simply an act of dramatic stupidity. Unless there's a mission, and unless the mission *could not* be accomplished by anything less drastic and painful than the incarnation and death of the Son of God, then such a painful action is senseless. *Why not just send a card or an e-mail or text?! OR Just blow a kiss?*

Which begs a number of questions, like: “*What IS wrong?*” “*Why such a drama?*” “*Why such pain and suffering?*” “*Why such a death?*”

To which the answer given in the Bible is straightforward.

- We've sinned! We've rebelled against our maker.
- We've deluded ourselves into believing that we can go it alone without God
- We've forgotten that life is a gift, *and that without God's breath from moment to moment, we die.*

To put it in terms of Genesis 2: there's a serpent in paradise, and we, like Adam and Eve, have used the gift of free choice to join the dark side!

OR To put it in terms of today's reading — in Genesis 3: even our simplest sinful choices have enormous and deadly consequences, for all of life

- for the creation itself
- for relationships with one another
- for our own sense of purpose and pleasure
- and for our relationship with God

Our sin alienates us from our Maker and his intent, and alienates us from the intimate presence and life of God. And — precisely because we are valuable — God holds us to account — dramatically: by throwing us out of the garden and guarding the way back in. Let me read from Genesis 3 again.

²²Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, (on top of that) since humankind might reach out and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever, ²³the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

²⁴God drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden God placed (*his angels*) the cherubim — and a sword flaming and turning — **to guard the way to the tree of life.**

And this is the predicament of every human being. The story of Adam and Eve is our story too. We are not only glorious human beings made in the image of God, and loved eternally by God. Yet, at

the very same time, we are sinners, who have used the gift of choice to rebel against God, and we're worthy of death — exclusion from God's intimate presence

Sometimes of course, we know it: — this *Jekyll and Hyde* mixture in our souls — “glory” mixed up with sin and evil.

- On the one hand, we can see the glory in the incredible human accomplishments in human history: incredible architecture, advances in medical science, agriculture and communications. Unthinkable a generation ago, and from which we have all benefited. *We're made in the image of God, and this is what we should expect.*
- But then, on the other hand, you've got the flip side, where the power of evil is enormous too; where, with the flip of a switch, we have the power and ability to destroy everything!

So much of history is not about good but about evil: one bloody battle and conflict after another

- Some estimates indicate that *in over 90% of the 230 years* since 1776, our nation has been at war!
- Around the world, racial and tribal strife and prejudice still seem to be the norm rather than the exception.

And even when we try to do good — evil often gains the upper hand and **the law of unintended consequences** kicks in:

So, e.g., we try to create ***a system of justice*** which legitimately protects our citizens as a whole from drugs and danger. But unintentionally we create a prison system in which incarceration disproportionately impacts men of color and on a massive scale: (according to the Bureau of Justice)

- 1 in every 106 white men are incarcerated
- and 1 in every 36 Hispanic men
- but for African Americans it's **1 in every 15** (7 times the statistics for whites).

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that there's something profoundly wrong here: certainly not intended by most, but ending up unjust, unrighteous — and certainly at times, blatantly evil.

So — We can see it in society as a whole (and the Old Testament Scriptures point this out repeatedly) **this mix of glory and goodness; and pain and evil** in society as a whole)

BUT more than that — if we're honest — we can also see it in ourselves as individuals too.

Nobody could accuse Jesus of not loving those he came in touch with. He was not blind to the *preciousness of the image of God* in every human being he met. But ultimately he was not blind either to the *perniciousness of sin* in every human being he met too!

Time and again in his teaching and stories, he probed deep into human hearts to say that **sin and evil** in the world **were not just** about the great public political struggles of life, **but were also** about the small and undisciplined choices of our heart and minds as well .

¹⁹Out of the heart (says Jesus in Matthew 15)

come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20

These are what defile a person

And in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5

- It's not just murder that is wrong — but the harboring of anger
- It's not just adultery that's wrong — but the prolonged look of lust

- It's not just breaking relationships that's wrong — but failure to mend them

In other words, it's not just the things you do that matter, but the things you never get around to doing.

So, in Matthew 25:42-43, Jesus indicates that on the Day of Judgment, he will say to some people:

“Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

- for I was hungry and you gave me — no food
(DR: *you just didn't get around to it*)
- I was thirsty and you gave me — nothing to drink
- I was a stranger and you — did not welcome me
- naked and you — did not give me clothing
- sick and in prison and — you did not visit me.’

And the thing is this: that in our quiet moments we all know this. That as the old Episcopal Book of Common Prayer puts it

- We have done the things we ought *not* to have done
- And we have *left undone* the things we ought to have done. And there is no health in us.

But the very perniciousness of sin is seen *in our ignoring* of this truth

And at times *in our adamant denial* that we, and we alone, are to blame. Our pride kicks in and the blame game begins as it did in Genesis 3, in the Garden of Eden long ago. Adam blames Eve; Eve blames the serpent!

In all my 48 years driving, I've only received one speeding ticket! In fact one of the moments of my life of which *I'm most proud* (*do you see how pernicious sin is? As soon as we succeed, pride kicks in!*) . . . was when I talked my way out of a speeding ticket from a Louisiana State trooper on I-10.

But, on this second occasion, alas, I failed. I was with our youth group, rafting on the New River in West Virginia. It had been a good day I was doing something good! I was with my son as a parent driving in the car, sharing “quality time.” And the siren and lights came out of nowhere.

I said to myself, “Who could that be for? Can't be me!” And then I looked at my speedometer and saw I was going 80! I was guilty but I was embarrassed in front of my son and filled with excuses. So I tried to talk my way out of it with the Trooper who calmly wrote the ticket — making me even madder inside, where I swore secretly that “if this is what they did to visitors in West Virginia then I'd never to return to the State again” (well, of course, I didn't keep the promise: I've been back many times!).

“NOT MY FAULT!” I can still feel my anger and denial. **But the cross of Jesus Christ is God's word to all of us, that whether we see it or not, deny it or own it**, that none of us has the right to point the finger at others, without pointing to ourselves too!

- It's not just *their* fault, it's *our* fault too — we are never without guilt.
- It was *my sin* that led to his death

The cross of Jesus Christ is God's word to all of us

- We're all, equally, a part of the mess
- We've all made choices that rebel against God and deny the truth and open the door to evil

Just a bite of the fruit: it all seems so trivial. Sin rarely, if ever, seems *that serious!* But it is. If it weren't so, then Jesus the Son of God would never have had to die for me or you!

It's by the cross that we know who we are. The cross reveals our true identity:

On the one hand: Made by God — in God's Image. Glorious. Loved and adored, and worthy of the sacrificial love of God himself

On the other hand: Caught in the deadly trap of sin. Powerless to reform ourselves and destined for *a separation* from our maker, that ends in death.

Unless of course, God himself — Should come to our rescue, and pull us up out of the mire and fire, and disarm the cherubim at the gate, and welcome us back home, to "the Garden." Which — thank God — he does!!

**I've got Good News and Bad News. Or rather,
I've got Good News and Bad News and Good news**

- (1) Here's the Good News: *Children of God, You are made in his image!
And greatly loved and adored.* But Wait, there's more!
- (2) Here's the Bad News: *All have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God
The wages of sin is death — we're stuck.* But wait, there's more!
- (3) Here's more Good News — because of that same death on the cross:
the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

May God help us to let the cross, in every dimension, determine your sense of identity: who you are and who you will become.

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