

New Beginnings

Genesis 1-6 by Patty Friesen (January 1, 2017)

This New Year's Day we begin our Old Testament series at the very beginning in Genesis. Genesis is at the beginning of the Bible because it is a book about beginnings, from the beginnings of the universe and various orderings of humankind to the beginnings of the people of Israel. It also witnesses to the beginnings of God's activity in the life of the world. Its range is breathtaking, moving from the expanse of the cosmos to the intimacy of family, from ordered world to reconciled brothers, from the seven days of creation of the universe to the seventy descendants of Jacob entering Egypt.

Genesis stands at the beginning because creation is the fundamental theological category for the rest of the Bible. The order, peace and harmony that God creates between earth and humanity serves as the state to which God always desires to return. The book of Genesis begins with the ordered 7 days of creation and then moves into the ordering of families into genealogies. This reminds we humans that we are not God's first thought. Creation was God's first thought and then God found an important role within that for humans to serve.

In Grade 6 Bible Class at Osler School, we learned that the book of Genesis, the stories of creation and God and the invention of writing scripture itself began in Mesopotamia – the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the modern country of Iraq. It is significant that this is the birthplace of civilization where people move from being individual nomadic tribes to farmers. It is where ancient people began farming in the fertile land between the rivers. It is also where they start gathering in cities and building temples to the gods that they had begun talking about around campfires. It is

where they gathered reeds to create paper for writing. It is where they begin writing and stories of the God of the Bible. It is where they first began writing laws on stone as in the first and famous Laws of Hammurabi written on stone edifices – an idea perhaps copied by the children of Israel with their 10 commandments on stone tablets.

Mesopotamia is where it where it all begins. As they say in the real estate business – it's about location, location, location. It is where the Garden of Eden is believed to be. It is where Mount Ararat in the north is where Noah's ark is believed to have landed. It is where Abraham and Sarah were called to leave the land of Ur and travel to the land of Canaan.

Genesis is a book whose plot is genealogy. The genealogies may be boring for we moderns to read but in ancient times, they were an anchor to the whole story of Genesis and their original setting was the families and tribes, who transmitted these genealogies orally over many generations. They show that every character is kin to every other, a key to Israelite self-identity, especially in times of conflict or dispersion. We see that within the Jewish genealogies after the Holocaust. Who is left as survivors and who are they connected to became exceedingly important for self-identity. Same with the Russian Mennonites suffering split families and dispersal after the Russian revolution 100 years ago. It became exceedingly important to know who you were related to, who was left alive and where did they go. In the same way, Genesis is fundamentally about one big extended family. The genealogies also show that Israel is related to all the peoples of the earth, and their salvation is linked to the salvation of all peoples of the earth.

Genesis, chapter 3 begins with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, is redeemed in the Garden of Gethsemane and ends with the Trees of Healing in the Book of Revelation. Inasmuch as God made the serpent, the text raises the issue of God's responsibility for what happens in the Garden of Eden. God holds ultimate responsibility in the sense that God did not create puppets but made human beings in such a way that they could resist the will of God. But God's responsibility doesn't come any closer than that and does not speak of God as the tempter or the instigator of the serpent's wiles or the source of sin and evil. At this very point, the serpent is only part of God's good creation. Sin and evil emerge only subsequent to the creation of the world. The first human beings are presented as individuals who are not sinful, but with clear choices available to them, with no response coerced or inevitable. God has not programmed the divine-human relationship.

The serpent isn't evil but crafty. It elicits certain characteristics in the human. The serpent's craftiness is the ability to provoke reflection on the true meaning of freedom, to reveal by means of conversation that the woman had the ability to think for herself, to suggest that she indeed had the power to decide for herself. In this respect, the serpent is using skills that we use in pastoral care and chaplaincy – empowering people to decide and act as their own agents. That may be a stretch but the comparison between the serpent and pastors came to mind!

What is the sin here in the Garden of Eden? The word sin doesn't actually appear. God deems the eating of the fruit as clearly wrong as an act of disobedience or prideful desire to become like God themselves. The primal sin isn't their freedom but their mistrust of God. Can humans trust that God has their best interests at heart even if

they do not know everything? Even more, can humans trust that God will discern that not everything that benefits us is in our best interest?

Genesis chapter 3 does not support a notion of original sin. Original sin refers to the universality or inescapability of human sinfulness that is genetic. Meaning that we are all sinful from way back to Adam and Eve. Genesis 3 doesn't suggest that sin is transferred to future generations. When we get to Adam and Eve's sons Cain and Able, they make their own choices how to relate as brothers and jealousy leads to murder. All these humans have their own choices and their bad choices and mistrust of God snowball through Genesis 3-6 culminating in 6:5 where "every inclination of the thoughts of human hearts was only evil continually." This leads up to the need for God to undo creation with the Flood and begin again.

As human freedom and independence grows, so does God's response to it. The images of God that quickly develop in Genesis are a God who expresses sorrow and regret; a God who judges but doesn't want to, and then not in arbitrary or annihilative ways; a God who goes beyond justice and determines to save some creatures, including every animal and bird; a God who commits to the future of a less than perfect world; a God open to change and doing things in new ways and a God who promises never to do this again. Genesis reveals and resolves a fundamental tension within God, emphasizing finally, not a God who decides to destroy, but a God who wills to save, who is committed to change based on God's experience with the world, and who promises to stand by what God created. The Flood doesn't actually change humankind but it does change God. The God-world relationship is not simply that of a strong God and a needy world. Nor is it a tortured relationship between a grieving God and a resistant world.

God preserving Noah and his family through dangerous water gets repeated in the Exodus crossing of the Red Sea and Jesus calming the storm and walking on water. And ultimately God's care of us through the symbol of water is what we re-enact in our baptisms and through the taking of communion.

As we begin this New Year, let us begin anew once again in our life in Christ through the sharing of this meal of thanksgiving for all God has done for us in history and through the past year.