

Dear Friends,

Welcome to the second week of our on-line Bible study. We have a joyful Sunday in front of us, we'll celebrate communion and welcome new members into the congregation.

Our scripture lesson for the day is not from the lectionary. Instead of going with one of the assigned texts I'm going to preach on Genesis 1:1-28. Here is the passage from "The Message" a translation by Eugene Peterson.

1-2 First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

3-5 God spoke: "Light!"
And light appeared.
God saw that light was good
and separated light from dark.
God named the light Day,
he named the dark Night.
It was evening, it was morning—
Day One.

6-8 God spoke: "Sky! In the middle of the waters;
separate water from water!"
God made sky.
He separated the water under sky
from the water above sky.
And there it was:
he named sky the Heavens;
It was evening, it was morning—
Day Two.

9-10 God spoke: "Separate!
Water-beneath-Heaven, gather into one place;
Land, appear!"
And there it was.
God named the land Earth.
He named the pooled water Ocean.
God saw that it was good.

11-13 God spoke: "Earth, green up! Grow all varieties
of seed-bearing plants,
Every sort of fruit-bearing tree."
And there it was.

Earth produced green seed-bearing plants,
all varieties,
And fruit-bearing trees of all sorts.
God saw that it was good.
It was evening, it was morning—
Day Three.

14-15 God spoke: “Lights! Come out!
Shine in Heaven’s sky!
Separate Day from Night.
Mark seasons and days and years,
Lights in Heaven’s sky to give light to Earth.”
And there it was.

16-19 God made two big lights, the larger
to take charge of Day,
The smaller to be in charge of Night;
and he made the stars.
God placed them in the heavenly sky
to light up Earth
And oversee Day and Night,
to separate light and dark.
God saw that it was good.
It was evening, it was morning—
Day Four.

20-23 God spoke: “Swarm, Ocean, with fish and all sea life!
Birds, fly through the sky over Earth!”
God created the huge whales,
all the swarm of life in the waters,
And every kind and species of flying birds.
God saw that it was good.
God blessed them: “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Ocean!
Birds, reproduce on Earth!”
It was evening, it was morning—
Day Five.

24-25 God spoke: “Earth, generate life! Every sort and kind:
cattle and reptiles and wild animals— all kinds.”
And there it was:
wild animals of every kind,
Cattle of all kinds, every sort of reptile and bug.
God saw that it was good.

26-28 God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them
reflecting our nature
So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,
And, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth."
God created human beings;
he created them godlike,
Reflecting God's nature.
He created them male and female.
God blessed them:
"Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!
Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth."

These are the opening verses of the Bible, the first of the two creation stories in Genesis. Behind these verses there is a line of inquiry as ancient as curiosity itself. A series of questions as old as the art of storytelling. "Who made us? What do we know of our Creator? And what does it mean to be a human being? To be animal but much, much more?" The story is part of the "pre-history" of Israel. After the exodus, when the ancient Hebrews were beginning to shape and be shaped by their religion they turned to the questions above, listened for answers in their own traditions, from each other and from God, and began shaping the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

These are the themes we will explore on Sunday morning, particularly the question of what it means to be "made in the image of" or "reflect the nature of" a God who is defined not by what he has or by what he takes, *but by what God gives*.

For now, though, I'd like to take a step backward and explore the question of how this story is true, even though it didn't happen, and how we might best appropriate that truth. These aren't questions that will surface in Sunday's sermon, but they rest beneath (or hover over) a lot of what I have to say. You'll probably hear me return to these ideas time and again in the future. I'd love to hear what you make of them. If you respond to this e-mail the note will be directed to my in-box.

In my thoughts below I'm relying on the work of a theologian named George Lindbeck. He wrote a very influential work of theology about twenty years ago titled On the Nature of Doctrine: Toward a Postliberal Theology. I first read this book as an undergraduate and was absolutely upended by it. Years later I went to Divinity School to study with Lindbeck and his "disciples." He was retired by the time I enrolled, but his influence loomed large.

Some people, of course, believe that the first chapter of Genesis is a literal "scientific" account of creation. Fundamentalist Christians see Christianity as a series of truth claims about objective realities. Lindbeck calls this the "propositionalist" approach to religion. Folks in this category believe that "Hell is real and fire is hot!" And that Christianity is a series of truths and propositions the believer must

swallow like so much oatmeal.

Although Christian fundamentalism claims to be a return to tradition, it is actually a response to modernity and conducts itself according to the logic of modern science, which holds that truth claims are either factual or they are not. To be clear, even though it often appears to be in conflict with “science” the modern scientific worldview determines the ground that fundamentalism walks upon. Grand religious claims (like the creation story or the incarnation) are collapsed into scientific categories of “possible or impossible. “Fundamentalism then insists that they are possible and actually happened, as if scripture were a textbook. This leads fundamentalism into all sorts of absurdities, such as the need to assert that human beings and dinosaurs walked the earth at the same time.

The other major strand of theological thought in American Protestantism has been “Liberal Protestantism.”

What is Liberal Protestantism?

Liberal Protestantism is a modern movement that reinterprets the biblical and historic doctrines and practices of Christianity in order to bring them in line with the rise of science and nineteenth century Enlightenment thought. It is an extremely elusive concept. A common thread in Liberal Protestant thought is the desire to adapt religious ideas to modern culture and modes of thinking. Liberal Protestantism insists that the world has changed since the time Christianity was founded, making many Christian faith claims incomprehensible to people today. Liberal Protestants are interested in adapting religious ideas to modern culture and thought. Rather than reading the world through the Bible, Liberal Protestantism reads the Bible through the world. For instance, early 19th century Liberal Protestant theologians practiced a strident anti-supernaturalism—insisting that the Bible must be freed of symbolic myths and miracle stories which act as obstacles to modern, rational believers. Rather than getting hung up on fictional, mythical claims Liberal Protestants want to turn to the “eternal truths” such stories point to. Liberal Protestantism tends to locate ultimate religious authority in the self. Rather than submitting to an outmoded orthodoxy, Liberal Protestants turn inward and use their own personal religious experience to authenticate or disregard doctrinal and Biblical claims.

These categories get blurred of course, but for the most part the theological heritage of the Hills Church is that of Liberal Protestantism. Lindbeck calls this method of being religions “experiential expressivism.”

Experiential expressivism holds that religions are creative expressions of our deep, internal, personal experiences of God. These expressions take different shapes and forms, but the root experience is the same. I can talk about Jesus. You can talk about auras. She can find God in the cold blue water of the Atlantic Ocean. And we’re all, more or less, saying the same thing. This approach holds that the deepest experiences and commitments of every religion are universal. They simply surface differently, as poetic expressions of our universal, and inward experiences of God. It makes sense that those who understand religion in this way are very hesitant to tell someone else where they ought to go to church or what they should believe. It is as odd as saying, “Here, I wrote this poem. Memorize it and feel the same emotions I felt putting pen to paper.”

In practice: If I were sitting across the table from a devout Muslim and we were to scrape away the contradictory and distinctive claims our respective religions make, we'd find that underneath all the pious jargon we're talking about the same God. If I set aside the distinctively Christian claim that God suffered on the cross, and he set aside the distinctively Muslim claim that the Koran completes and perfects Christian revelation, we'd find that we're talking about the same God.

One of the reasons I struggle with Liberal Protestantism is that I've realized that Islam without the Koran is no religion at all, and Christianity without the cross has no real reason to exist. The logic of each faith breaks down when you take away what makes them distinct and unique (and contradictory).

Years ago, three weeks before Easter, I visited my neighborhood UCC. The minister celebrated communion without once mentioning Jesus. When I stepped forward to receive the bread he said, "sustenance for your Lenten journey," as if he were handing out ham sandwiches before a hike. I have rarely felt so let down. The blurry religiosity of his words wandered well-past the point of meaninglessness. They didn't point me toward God, they pointed me toward *something*, but something very unclear.

I grew up in a home that paid careful attention to the particularities of the Christian story. One of my clearest memories is of Christmas morning sitting on the parsonage staircase in Alpena, Michigan, waiting to race into the living room to tear presents open. But having to sit still as my father read the account of Jesus' birth from Luke's gospel. "This comes first," he said.

And in my childhood it did. The stories of our faith were woven into my upbringing. Noah, the ark and its animals were on my bed sheets. Moses and his burning bush lived in my imagination, and I made sense of the world through the story I heard time and again. The story of Jesus, of his death, the terrible price he paid to bring us the good news of God's love; of his resurrection and victory over the grave, over anyone and anything that would say "no" to the love of God. During my childhood, God was in my life clearly and tangibly.

I more or less stopped going to church as a teenager after my father died. Initially, this was because it was hard for my family to attend the church where my dad had been the pastor, and it was hard for the church and their new minister as well. But, ultimately, I stopped worshiping because the Church's stories lost their hold over me. I don't know why this happened. It is something of a chicken and egg question, but I think that, first, I stopped going to church and then the story lost its power. In any event, aside from the occasional holiday obligation, I stayed away from church for nearly fifteen years.

I never stopped believing in God. But, during this chapter of my life, the God whom I had known clearly and tangibly grew indistinct and seemed to retreat further and further into formless, hazy mystery.

In harsh language Stanley Hauerwas writes that when Christians try to follow God without using Christian language we "damn ourselves into vagueness." I don't like that statement because, for me, it proved true. Without the Christian story, and without the church to tell it, God grew so indistinct as to be non-existent. I knew that something was out there, but what?

It was not until I read the gospel of Mark thirteen years ago that God began to grow clear again. And it was not until I re-immersed myself in the Church and its story of Christ's birth, crucifixion and resurrection, that God came into sharp relief, a distinct and knowable deity who calls me to surpass my limitations and loves me when I fail to do so. In short, I need the distinctive, idiosyncratic truth claims of Christianity in order to have God in my life.

My experience illustrates the third way that George Lindbeck proposes.

He begins by following the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and argues that *language creates experience*.

That is to say, you discover what it means to be "enthralled" after you learn the word. He goes on to say that religion functions like language. Religion is the *producer* of religious experience, rather than the *expression* of religious experience. First, we learn the Christian story and then we are religious.

Helen Keller provides an excellent example of how this works. You will recall that in February of 1882, when Helen was nineteen months old, she was stricken with an illness that left her both blind and deaf. The following few years nearly devastated Helen and her family. She couldn't learn to speak and became an intensely difficult child, smashing dishes and lamps and terrorizing the whole household with her screaming and violent tantrums. Relatives regarded her as a *monster* and urged her parents to place her in an institution.

But they couldn't bear to. On 3 March 1887 a teacher named Anne Sullivan arrived at the Keller house. Anne and Helen moved into a small cottage on the land of the main house to try and get Helen to improve her behavior. Anne began by simply letting Helen know that she was loved. She fed her, brushed her hair, buttoned her old-fashioned shoes. Over the coming weeks, Helen's behavior began to improve as a bond grew between the two. Then, after a month, a "miracle" occurred. As she cared for the child, Anne had been trying to teach her how to finger-spell with sign language. But Helen had not yet fully understood the meaning of words. When Anne led her to the water pump on 5 April 1887, all that changed.

As she pumped the water over Helen's hands, Anne took Helen's left hand and spelled out the word. Years later Helen recounted the incident:

"We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honey-suckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten, a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me."

Helen immediately asked Anne for the name of the pump to be spelt on her hand and then the name of the flowers whose perfume she spelled. All the way back to the house Helen learned the name of

everything she touched and also asked for Anne's name. Anne spelled the name "Teacher" on Helen's hand.

Helen's progress from then on was astonishing. Her vocabulary grew exponentially. She learned to express her feelings, name her emotions, place existence within a frame of meaning. She stopped throwing tantrums and became serene. The acquisition of language let Helen actualize her capacities for thought, action and feeling. She was transformed! The "monster" became a beautiful human being. In Lindbeck's understanding, we are Helen Keller: blind, unable to speak to God, and unable to hear God speaking. The Church is our Anne Sullivan and the Christian story our sign language. Just as clear well water poured over Helen's hands before she could name or know it, God is being poured out over our lives already. When we learn the story of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience existence in its terms, we, too, will come to know and name the water. God will become distinct, saving, knowable, rather than a distant mystery, or fuzzy non-judgmental energy. Lindbeck calls this approach to religion "postliberalism."

Postliberalism's founding argument was propounded by Lindbeck's Yale colleague Hans Frei in "The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative" (1974). Frei observed that modern conservative and liberal approaches to the Bible both undermine the authority of scripture by locating the meaning of biblical teaching in some doctrine or worldview that is held to be more foundational than scripture itself.

Before the Enlightenment most Christians read the Bible primarily as a kind of realistic narrative that told the overarching story of the world. The coherence of this story made figural interpretation possible; certain events within and outside of scriptural narrative were viewed as having prefigured or reflected the central biblical events. Jews and Christians made sense of their lives by viewing themselves as related to and participating within the story told in scripture.

Frei argued that during the Enlightenment this sense of scripture as realistic narrative was lost. Because their own rationalized experience increasingly defined for them what was "real," theologians sought to understand scripture by relating it to their own (supposedly universal) "reality." That is, they sought to determine the truth within and about scripture by translating it into the truer language of their own world. Frei argued that there were two main strategies by which modern theologians reconstrued scriptural meaning. Liberals looked for the real meaning of the Bible in the eternal truths about God and humanity that it conveyed, while conservatives looked for the real meaning in the Bible's factual references.

In both cases, the priority of scriptural narrative itself was overturned. Scripture no longer defined the world in which Christians lived; rather, "Interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story."

With the loss of scripture as a grand formative narrative, the Bible became increasingly alien to the church. Its meaning became decipherable only to an academic elite. Liberal scholars looked for culture-affirming eternal truths in scripture and otherwise deconstructed the canonical text into historical-critical fragments. Conservatives and evangelical fundamentalists turned the text into source material for propositions and developed highly artificial harmonizations of conflicting factual statements that

created internal “solutions” not found in scripture at all.

Postliberal theology searches to construct a “third way” between Liberal Protestantism’s tendency to subsume God’s Word into the world, and Fundamentalism’s tendency to make an idol out of scripture. Postliberal theologians try to do this by calling the Church back to the Biblical narrative, by asking us to interpret and experience ourselves and our world through the stories of Israel and Jesus.

Whew! That’s a lot of information – and it will stay in the background on Sunday morning. However, as I’ve said above, I thought this week’s text provided a good chance to share some of what goes on behind the sermon most every week.