

Sermon for the First Sunday in Christmas

Year C

December 31, 2006, The Rev. Randal B. Gardner

As I am sure you know, the best of all the students in a classroom is the teacher. If you really want to learn about something, offer to teach it.

So over the month of December, as I prepared for the course I was teaching on Genesis, and even though I have taught that course before, I came into some wonderful new insights and information that have been a real blessing for me. I want to share something of what I learned with you this morning.

The connection between my study of Genesis and this morning's readings is the opening chapter of John's Gospel. Both of these great works of spiritual literature use the same opening line – in the beginning. Genesis, of course, expands upon those words to offer the sacred stories about why the world is the way it is and about why the selection of Israel as the chosen people has the potential to change the world for the better.

John takes this opening reference to the beginning and recounts the stories of Jesus that reveal how his life is the revelation, the incarnation, of God's own voice and creative desire for humanity. If Genesis is a story about how the world began, John's Gospel is the story about how God is making it possible for the world to begin anew, restored not to paradise, but to grace, love and truth.

Genesis, I learned this time through it, really is about the disastrous conflict that derives from family favoritism. It is a chronicle of how humanity comes to be divided, of how humanity has learned to carry in its very soul the distrust and animosity that so mark our history.

From the opening betrayal of Adam and Eve by each other, the first castigations of blaming instead of taking responsibility, the story goes downhill. God plays favorites between Cain and Abel, and the scorned brother murders the other. Noah blesses two sons and curses the third. Abraham favors one son over the others, as does that favored son with his own, as does that favored grandson with his own sons.

The Book of Genesis is, I saw for the first time, a book full of inequity and disharmony, of war and revenge, a book almost entirely without admirable characters. Yet it is a book ringing with the hope, glowing with the turns by which these broken and fearful men and women show the capacity for graciousness, for forgiveness, for flights of consciousness that carry them into conversation with God. Though not admirable, these flawed men and women, so like us, achieve nobility simply because they are able to trust God and risk themselves for the sake of obedience to his commands.

I came to see for the first time that the stories of Joseph, with which the book ends, were not simply an appendix, as my seminary professor taught us. But in fact those stories conclude the account of the beginning of the world with the demonstration of how powerful forgiveness is, with the lesson that God's plan for blessing the world

becomes reality when the brothers who hate each other find a way to return to unity in spite of hurts and jealousy.

Joseph, the one favored with the love of his father and with the spiritual gifts of God, is also arrogant, strutting in his resplendent cloak and constantly reminding his brothers of his visions and dreams. The brothers, naturally enough, despise him and conspire to do him harm. Thus the cycles of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau continue. However, by consignment to the darkness of the well and the bondage of the prisons, Joseph begins to offer his spiritual gifts for the good of others, no longer a source of pride and personal honor. By the spiritual astuteness gained through suffering and disaster, Joseph becomes the potentate of Pharaoh and servant of all the people.

When his brothers, the very ones who sold him to the Egyptian slave traders, come to Egypt to buy food, Joseph recognizes them. But they do not recognize him. When at last Joseph reveals his true identity to them, he does so in such a way that the entire book of Genesis turns from the chronicle of why humanity is such a mess to an offering of hope that humanity can be redeemed. While the other characters in Genesis move toward reconciliation as a way to get out from under guilt and fear, the Joseph story moves into reconciliation as the blessing through which God intends to bless all the nations.

Joseph says at last, "I am your brother." The brothers in response confess their wrong and admit their guilt in having abused and sold him. And Joseph, in a most remarkable application of faith and maturity, declares, "Do not grieve, do not reproach yourselves for having sold me here, since God sent me before you to preserve your lives, to assure the survival of your race on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So it was not you who sent me here but God, and he has set me up as a father to Pharaoh, as lord of all his household and governor of the whole of Egypt."

In the end, the blessing with which God chose to bless all the nations through Israel was found in the willingness of the brothers to be at peace, in the willingness of an aggrieved brother to offer forgiveness instead of taking revenge. It was the accomplishment of reconciliation that gave power to God's choice of Israel, and by that power the blessing of God would flow from them to all the nations.

In John's Gospel this morning we find this remarkable line: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." To all. Not to some. Not to the true believers. Not to the righteous. But to all who received him, who believed in his name.

Friends, we begin the New Year at a time of surplus righteousness, of too many who have the gift of clear vision into the minds and hearts of others. The claim of moral superiority is abundant in our world, and the accusation of faithlessness and perversity rings in every corridor of religious and sectarian power. What is it, six churches of this small diocese who have declared themselves too Christian to break bread with the rest of us? How many of the divided churches of Protestantism consider others too heretical to exchange the prayer of Peace?

What happens when the family of brothers and sisters, who by God's gift have become God's own sons and daughters, betray the blessing enabled by reconciliation and unity for the sake of standing apart from each other in private cells of accusation and self determined righteousness? I don't have an answer for the question. But, if the great movement of Genesis is toward Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers, and the great introduction to the Jesus story in John's gospel is that this transformation of nature is given to all who believe, how can any righteous church divided be more faithful than a sinful church that at least practices the unity Christ taught was at the center of his commandments?

John's gospel begins with this remarkable declaration of new Genesis, a new beginning to the whole of creation. It ends with a remarkable declaration by Jesus to his disciples, that when the world sees you loving each other, then it will have proof that Jesus is from God.

The miracle of God's redemptive plan may not, after all, be heaven or resurrection. The miracle of God's redemptive plan may be that it is possible, truly possible, for people divided by hate and distrust to live in harmony and peace. I offer these reflections today in the hope that as each of us feels the pull of our human nature to separate, to blame, to hate, to stand apart in righteous indignation, that we will pause to recall something of this sacred story of invitation to choose instead the humiliation of reconciliation, the self denial of peacefulness. If there is to be power in our teaching, power in our preaching, power in being the church, it will not likely come from stridency of voice and certainty of virtue. God's power, if it is to come, will likely shine through fellowship restored, through reconciling love offered, through that recognition that brothers and sisters in peace are the living Word through which Christ continues the new creation.