

The Unchangeable Character of God's Purpose
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
September 6, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:
Deuteronomy 6:20-25
Hebrews 6:13-20

The big story in business last week wasn't about banks or car makers. It was about Mickey Mouse and Spider Man.

The Walt Disney Company paid \$4 billion for Marvel Comics, getting its more than 5,000 superheroes and other characters. As a former corporate communications officer, I admit I had to chuckle when I read the statement in the press release by Disney's CEO:

"Adding Marvel to Disney's unique portfolio of brands provides significant opportunities for long-term growth and value creation"

Those are pretty high-fallutin' words when you're talking about Goofy, Snow White, Wall E and Miley Cyrus teaming up with Captain America, the Fantastic Four, Thor and the Hulk.

If nothing else, the sale price of \$4 billion is a testament to the lasting value of superheroes in the American psyche. Part of us loves to imagine what it would be like to fly or stop a locomotive or catch a falling airplane.

We know we can count on superheroes to come through. But perhaps we love them for another reason. They never change. Sure, movie makers and comic book writers have added some depth and intrigue to the characters through the decades. But Batman is still Batman. Perhaps, in this world where nothing ever seems to stay the same, we long for characters who are tried and true, who are fundamentally the same from one generation to the next.

On this weekend that marks the unofficial end of summer, we wind down the Summer Sermon Grab Bag with a question we have all probably pondered at one time or another: Does God change? Is the God of the Old Testament – the one who is angered by Israel, the one whom the Psalms describe as jealous and vengeful, the same as the

God of the New Testament realized in and through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ?

Did God change? And if God changed then, could God change now or in the future? Is it God who changes? Or is it our understanding of God that changes?

* * *

To begin, it may be most helpful to consider the place and role of scripture because it is there that we find these descriptions that might seem so contradictory. Writing specifically about the Old Testament, the pastor and Harvard professor Peter Gomes says this in his best-selling work, titled The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart.

“Although Hebrew scripture takes different forms – poetry, history, law and wisdom – the subject is always the same: the relationship between God’s people and their God.¹”

Gomes’ point – an important one – is that while we understand scripture to be both divinely inspired and always living, scripture is also the effort of God’s people to record ... and reflect on ... their journey with God. Perhaps there is no better example of this than the passage we heard a few minutes ago from Deuteronomy.

The scene is this: the people of Israel are amassed on the border, ready to enter Canaan, the much hoped-for promised land for which Israel had undergone so much and awaited for so long. There, Moses has gathered the people to remind them who they are and whose they are.

In that famous passage known as the “Shema”, Moses says:

“When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decree and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand The Lord brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that God promised us on oath to our ancestors.” (Deut. 6:20-21; 23)

This is, in a way, the climax of the first five books of the Bible, covering that longest history of the relationship between Israel and God. Israel is reflecting on its journey with

¹ P. 14

God. Part of that candid reflection is the undeniable truth that Israel failed God time and again, choosing one false religion after another, one idol after another.

So when we hear scripture like that verse in 2 Kings, saying “the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his sight” we see plainly that there are repercussions when God’s people disappoint God.

As one author wrote, scripture is “the story of freedom and promise and also a call to obedience and righteousness. There can be no liberation without the law and no freedom without justice.”

In other words, much of the Old Testament is the story of a particular struggle between God and Israel. God has particular expectations for Israel ... and particular reactions, including anger and jealousy, toward God’s chosen people when they turn away again and again despite God’s pledge to them.

Likewise, when we consider our own story with God, we are well served to claim our failures and their repercussions, just as Israel did in the Old Testament.

We are also well served to avoid reducing God to a handful of simple qualities and characteristics, especially ones that drip with sentimentality or would shape God into an image of our own making. God is a God of grace, yes, as much in the Old Testament as in the New. The Psalms praise God who “knit us together in our mother’s womb”, who loves us and names us before we are born, who protected Adam and Even after they were banished from the garden and Cain, too, after he murdered his brother.

Neither should we portray the God of the New Testament as one whose only quality is grace. Jesus, God in the flesh, was tough on his disciples and even tougher on the scribes and Pharisees and Roman officials. And in the end, the symbol of Christ is the cross, which is hardly a happy place.

* * *

The Book of Hebrews is one of those small letters in the back of the New Testament, and, by the way, we began studying those letters in our adult Sunday school class this morning.

Hebrews draws primarily from the Old Testament but, as a reflection on Christ, provides the full arc of the story of God and God’s people. It connects God’s promise to Abraham way back there in Genesis to the hope we are given in Jesus Christ.

Its author writes: "In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath" Hebrews 6:17

"The unchangeable character of God's purpose."

Purpose. Perhaps that's a word that can help us understand what God is up to. We aren't just a random part of God's existence. God's purpose is to love us and that purpose is ongoing, from the past to the present to the future. It was part of that purpose for God to liberate Israel from slavery in Egypt and it was part of that purpose to come into the world in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

God's purpose in loving us comes with expectations, yes. A parent's primary job is to raise a son or daughter to be a responsible, successful adult. That includes disciplining a child and communicating disappointment when the child strays or betrays the parent. Do we disappoint God? Of course. Has God been angry at God's people in the past and might God be angry again? You bet. Who, after all, would want a milquetoast God, whose symbol is a smiley face?

But the unchangeable character of God's purpose is to love us with love that is, more than anything else, full of grace purchased on the cross, sealed in the last supper. And as the letter to the Hebrews says, we are the heirs of that purchase, and with it we are given the estate of God's love, whose boundaries stretch out before us in distances we can hardly fathom, much less reach.

* * *

Last Sunday morning, I told the story of my friend Joe Martin. What I didn't know is that his brother, former congressman and North Carolina governor, Jim Martin, was, the same day, teaching a Sunday school class at our sister church, Covenant. Before Jim Martin was a politician, he was a professor of chemistry at Davidson and last week he taught a Sunday school class about the compatibility of science and faith.

Gov. Martin summarized his point of view by saying that maybe God didn't intend God's revelation to stop with the last book in the New Testament. The Observer quoted him as saying:

"Did God want a creature to evolve - us - that would have the capacity to look back ... and understand how we got here? I think that's very credible, and comforting."²

² Charlotte Observer, 8-31-09

That's a helpful perspective, I think, not just in regard to topics like science and evolution but in regard to our understanding of the nature and character of God. Scripture gives us a view of God from the vantage point of the nation of Israel, centuries after the story began, the story of a particular relationship. Scripture also gives us a view of God from the vantage point of the earliest Christians, trying to make sense of the mind-blowing event of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection.

To be sure, scripture is divine and inspired. But, at the same time, God is living and always revealing God's self. Circumstances change but God doesn't. Or, as Gov. Martin concludes, our understanding of God is always evolving and growing and deepening.

We are mortal, and with our mortality come limitations. God is God, known by an unwavering promise and a timeless purpose, but also a mystery that allows for us only partial understanding.

In another one of those small epistles in the back of the New Testament, the apostle Paul describes our creator as "immortal, invisible, God only wise."³ Inspired by that phrase, the Scottish hymnist Walter Chalmers Smith wrote a hymn that is familiar to many of us.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.

To all, life Thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life Though livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish, like leave on the tree,
Then wither and perish, but naught changeth Thee.

I, for one, agree with Gov. Martin, that a life of studying, worshipping and serving such a God as that is indeed one that is both credible and comforting.

To God be the glory. Amen.

³ 1 Timothy 1:17

