

“The Sanctity of Life and  
the Origins of Civil Order”  
Sermon for 28 April 2019  
Texts: Genesis 8:20-9:17

I have two things that I wish to address this morning: first, that we are hard-wired, through various attributes to worship God. God designed into us various attributes, abilities and aptitudes which inform our relationship to God and each other *as well as being necessary to life and obedience*. And second, that God mandates for us to do that which conforms to our created nature. He empowers us to do what he commands of us. Our attributes, in other words, are attuned to the obedience God expects; they are synched.

These things are not immediately apparent to us from the text—but they are plainly there, waiting to be teased out and explored. So let’s get to that.

**21 And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse [or, dishonor] the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. 22 While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”** ESV

Verse 20 sets forth that *Noah*, upon exiting the ark, *performed multiple sacrifices*. Keep him in view. **Some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird** he ritually prepared and offered up as **burnt offerings**. Right there and then, perhaps with the ark as an enormous dramatic backdrop, under the canopy of open blue sky, Noah built an altar as prescribed and offered up praise and worship to his God, prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving for an incomprehensibly great deliverance. I wonder if he sweated much. I wonder if he suffered from what we call PTSD, or shock. In the face of such finality, was horror mixed with awe and grief and sorrow? The only kind of joy that could exist in such circumstances would have to be joy in God himself. No other joy would be durable enough.

As I walked through these verses, focused on Noah, I noticed the **pleasing aroma**. As it dawned on me that the Lord had a sense of smell, and took pleasure in the aroma of the **burnt offerings** I rejoiced. I recollected pleasing aromas of my own: scents of Christmas, the smell of books, various meals and favorite dishes. I laughed inwardly as I thought about the conjunction of taste and smell. And then I paused, stunned with the realization that God didn’t have to give us the sense of smell, or of taste at all. Oh, and that he shares in these things, seems so wonderful. God **smelled the pleasing aroma** of the **burnt offerings** and was pleased. The moment had pleasing associations with it. Noah’s self-initiated worship—the joy, the exuberance and the extravagance of praise. Does it not remind you of King David dancing with abandon, all sweaty with exertion, exuberantly in the streets when the ark of the covenant was returned to Jerusalem? Or of the glistening face of joy when a mother first sees her newborn? And I wonder, in my train of associations, is there any freight of joy I can convey to you. I cannot be alone in this stream of consciousness kind of response—surely we could bless each other richly, listening

to the cascade which follows from **And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma**. Keeping Noah in our mind's eye, remembering that the **Pleasing** and the **burnt offerings** are going on simultaneously—interactively. between Noah on earth and God everywhere—what is the next thing that happens?

**And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma**, what then? What came next was divine *self-reflection*: **The Lord said in his heart**. Before we get to what he said, this being immensely more significant than a sense of smell, we pause to internalize the fact that our God self-reflects. And not only that, he self-reflects in response to Noah's worship. What if that is true of all worship, even of my worship? If God responds to Noah's thanks and praise, and he attends to my thanks and praise, there are implications for me, for my life. I might seek to live as "a continual act of worshipful rejoicing in God." If I am currently worshipful, rejoicing in God, if I am very much in the moment of "worshipful rejoicing," my heart would be glad, content, satisfied. Is it, or isn't it? Perhaps, the happiness of joyous praise is what our precious "freedom of religion" is actually about.<sup>1</sup>

So what do we have so far: 1. we have that we share a sense of smell with God; 2. we have that what we do in worship affects God; 3. that God experiences self-reflection and, apparently values our worship; and 4. we have the parallel cases of self-initiated behavior: Noah chooses to worship, God chooses to bless Noah in response. These gleanings from the text are wonderful in themselves but what do they have to do with our hard-wiring of various attributes? Or with the correspondence between these attributes and the mandates of God.

To answer those questions, let's start with the mandate: Gen. 1:28: **Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.** These are God's directives for us. Next, here are the attributes:

- Our sensory apparatus (smell, sight, taste, touch and hearing) is an extension of divine attributes.
- God is self-reflective and has bestowed that upon us as well.
- God has a heart, a center of essential being, so do we.
- God embodies moral excellence, holiness, and has imparted that also to his creatures, us. As he is worshipful, we are to be worshipping.
- God communicates and communes with others—including us.

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<sup>1</sup> As I meditated on these things I had a stunning thought. What if the "freedom of religion" is the same thing as "the pursuit of happiness?" Possible? I fear that when I have thought about "pursuit of happiness," in the past, I may have mistakenly tied it to the pursuit of materialistic ends . . . like money, sex, family, career, success or health? *Maybe that's not what was intended at all!* That would be a degradation of "happiness." If we turn this about, however, if instead of thinking down, we thought up, we might come up with "happiness consists in the "pursuit of God," the pursuit of spiritual things like worship, Christian service, sacrificial love and holiness. What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? (Mark 8:36) Or, **do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.** (Romans 12:2)

- God is a personal being, we share personality with him and each other.

There are doubtless other attributes that we could come up with but these six will suffice to show that when God demands that we **subdue** and exercise **dominion**, he has created, hard-wired into us, the aptitudes, the attributes and ability to keep his commandments. If God had not so designed, equipped and empowered us, we would have no moral liability and could not justly be held accountable which the judgment of the Flood clearly demonstrates that we are.

So let's return to the effects of Noah's worship. God is so pleased by Noah's self-initiated worship, a fervent and sincere worship (in spirit and in truth shall we say) and that Noah's ***worship precipitates a series of promises; it evokes a divine response:***

- I will never curse the ground again **because of man**
- I will never strike down every living creature **as I have done**
- I will exercise climate control . . . what?

Did I just say God will exercise climate control? Yes. God didn't use the exact words "climate control," but here are the words that he did use to convey the concept we use:

**22 While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."**

That means that *as long as the earth remains*, after which climate will be irrelevant, God will insure **seedtime and harvest**. God will insure that we have appropriate cycles of the seasons. It will not grow too hot (global warming) and it will not grow too cold (a catastrophic ice age won't destroy us). The sea levels won't rise and inundate us all like a second universal flood. God even insures that the moon and stars and the sun will persist in their diurnal round **while the earth remains**.

***Climate change is under divine control so we have no need to panic.*** The "end of the worlders" don't understand the climate, or our predicament, God does. We have it on the authority of God's Word. *The climate on the Lord's earth is not in crisis.* Divine sustainability is a real thing, a promise<sup>2</sup>.

In front of us is the *heart to heart worship* of Noah through the ritual sacrifice of **some of every clean animal**. (Gen. 8:20) That's a lot of blood shedding, and entails the killing of many innocent animals. And yet it is written, **when God smelled the**

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<sup>2</sup> Several cautions are in order. First, although PETA may rejoice to hear that God will not strike down every living creature, that does not mean that divinely sanctioned killing (for food, as punishment for crimes) is disallowed. Secondly, the fact that seasons will persist and that another great flood is prohibited is not an excuse to trash the world, or pollute our environment. What it means is that we move from fear-mongering to the saner mode of responsible stewardship. Good stewardship disallows much of the mindless, careless destruction which passes for development and progress. Green construction from here on makes sense, retrofitting the whole world is financially impossible. There are more, better (and more godly) reasons than carbon emissions reduction to abandon glass and steel buildings—a better urban environment is an all around win and that is doable. And moreover it is a moral imperative under our divine mandate.

**pleasing aroma** of the **burnt offerings** made by Noah on the altar, God's heartfelt response (**the Lord** (Yahweh, his personal name) **said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man . . ."**) There is so much in here! God was signaling the end of heavenly divine retribution for sin and signaling his desire for civil government, as ruled by man, to hold evil in check and insure that malefactors were justly treated and punished. God is spelling out what it means for man to exercise dominion, and the birth of civic government is instrumental to those ends. To what ends? The regulation of man's shedding of blood, what is permissible and what is condemnable as murder. There is a difference, an unbreachable it seems, between those who came to church Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka to worship their risen Lord and those who came to church to murder those worshippers. It is impossible to consider that their eternities could be identical—justice being so violated and the laws of God so transgressed<sup>3</sup>.

It may seem strange, ironic, given the massive sacrificial service just performed, (Gen. 8:20) that pre-imminent among God's concerns was *the sanctity of life*. Except, none of the animals just offered up was *tortured* in any way; they were *slaughtered humanely*. That means that they were bled out before dying and no animals were burned alive. Additionally, their blood was respectfully gathered and poured out upon the ground exactly as prescribed by God.

How do we know this? We know that sacrifice occurred outside the garden gate (Gen. 4:4) **an offering of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions**—this is a whole offering, a burnt offering of the form and sort followed by Noah (in Gen. 8). Abel knew what he was doing either from Adam, or God, or both! We can't determine if Cain's offering was made in rebellion, defiance, or ignorance but what is very clear is that Cain's heart attitude was poor, unacceptable to God. Then we have the sacrifices noted in Moses' day—where the meat of the sacrifice, the blood of the sacrifice and the power of the blood are all noted and acted upon. There follow sacrifices in the wilderness tabernacle—spelled out in detail by Moses which would have been consistent with the sacrificial practices of the patriarch (Noah on down). Then we have centuries of animal sacrifice in the Temple of Jerusalem. And, finally, we have the last sacrifice, that of our Lord and Savior to go by—wherein the blood of the atonement is just as highly prominent. All this blood shedding is carefully hedged in by ritual and rules. Sacrifice was, has always has been distinguished from wanton slaughter and murder. *Only man amongst all living things performs religious rites, like ritual sacrifice; only man consciously knows and worships God.*

*There is much more to glean from this passage, but it will have to wait. Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> God, in the wake of murderous slaughters, silently re-iterates his commandments: **Thou shalt not murder**. Those who died were victimized by those who blamed Christians for the massacre of Moslems, March 14 in Christ Church New Zealand. It does not appear that the murderers in New Zealand were Christian. If they were "Christians" in anything more than name, they would not do such a heinous thing. Pray for the perpetrators, they have born false witness and shed innocent blood. God avenges such things. Some of them have already died for their sins.