

“The Sanctity of Life and
the Origins of Civil Order”
Sermon for 26 May 2019
Texts: Genesis 8:20-9:7

There are several startling things to arise from the Genesis text. One is that God is in control of the earth's climate. The second is that the sanctity of life and the origin of civil government are both located here— as God puts back on the washed, first garment of his praise—namely, creation, *his first glory*(!), purged of sin and evil by the Flood. Wickedness was completely destroyed, but the destruction was not complete—some were saved. Having mentioned the first glory of God, I should explain that other glories are to follow. God's second glory was to be his people, the nation Israel—a people raised up for the glory of his great name! God's third glory is the body of Christ, the church where Jesus reigns in glory among us now and even forevermore. God created all that is for the purpose of bringing glory to himself—that is the end of all creation! God, high and lifted up, mighty, majestic, merciful and holy . . . God the Righteous One, the Eternal One, he alone is worshipful and worthy of all praise. Let all that is, all heavens and earth exalt the one true God.

So where do I obtain the knowledge that God is in control of the climate—which is as much as to say, we already have climate control! Well, it's here, Gen. 8:22: **While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter. day and night shall not cease.** God has promised, that as long as the earth remains—after which climate will hardly be applicable!—he will never subject the earth to perpetual winter, or perpetual summer—neither an ice age, nor endless heat and drought. Now the implications of this are several: first that because God is in control, mankind is not. Second, that panic over climate change is unwarranted. Third, it is either the height of pride, or of human overreach to claim we can save the planet. Climate change has been used to manipulate, frighten and recruit people to various political and ecological causes and people of faith need to stand aloof from the fear mongering. Standing aloof from fear however is not the same as abdicating our responsibilities to care for the earth, manage its resources wisely and to be both productive and careful stewards of all God has entrusted to our care. Has mankind created biohazards? Acted recklessly? Polluted and poisoned the earth? Yes, he has; wise and remedial actions are required of us as we go forward.

Remember the scriptural setting of v. 22 as you ponder its continuing significance for us:

20 Then Noah built an altar to the Lord (Elohim) and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. 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.”

The first act of Noah was one of sacrificial worship. Let the strangeness of that word “sacrificial” settle in. Next, ponder the altar. Where did Noah get the plans for that

structure? And “burnt offerings?” Where did burnt offerings on a worship altar come from? Well, it came from his forefathers, all the way back to Adam—acts of atonement for sin were necessitated for man’s sin nature. Just as reiterated here **for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth** (v.21), our sin nature necessitates atonement. What exactly is this sin nature? Let us see if we can extract from Psalm 62:3-4 a bit of what we are aiming at here:

**3 How long will you assail a man,
That you may murder him, all of you,
Like a leaning wall, like a tottering fence?
4 They have counseled only to thrust him
down from his high position;
They delight in falsehood;
They bless with their mouth,
But inwardly they curse.**

At first, I know, this seems too human. What does it have to do with man’s relationship with God? I respond with how we treat each others is a window to our heart attitude towards God. First, note the undercurrent of envy. This has the fingerprints of Cain all over it. How long will you assail Abel, Cain, that you may murder him? The assault is likened to the destruction of a tottering fence, the victim a leaning wall. Cain resented Abel’s **high position** (divine approval) and chose **to thrust him down**. The rest of the text fits Cain too well to warrant comment! Who does such things?! Those who presume injustice (it’s not fair) and assume error (mistakes?) on God’s part! Those who blame God, project evil on him and impugn either his righteousness or his holiness. I want us to see how like Cain’s in waiting we ourselves are! We blame suffering and evil on God as if they were his creation directly, and not an intrusion by a scoffing spoiler. This is our sin nature—that we doubt God’s goodness and suspect his proceedings through narrow unbelief. **There is no forgiveness apart from the shedding of blood** (Hebrews 9:19-22 cm. Lev. 17:11)¹ sounds too gruesome to be true. It isn’t. And, therefore, from the beginning, this practice of atonement has entailed ritual preparation of the sacrifice and the shedding of blood.

So, upon exiting the ark, Noah self-initiates worship and perhaps, with the ark behind as an enormous, dramatic backdrop etched against a vast blue sky, Noah make multiple sacrifices. His actions speak to his dominion superiority over all other clean animals—and by extension, all of life. His actions are approved of as “fitting and *pleasing*.” And that is why, **the fear and dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and bird of the heavens and everything that creeps on the ground and the fish of the seas. Into your hands they are delivered precedes Every moving things that lives shall be food for you.** (Gen, 9 vv.2-3) The primacy of man is first established in his capacity for worship activity, not in his diet!

If the end of all creation is the glorification of its Creator, then all histories, whether natural or of human affairs, *tend in the same direction*. The physical, natural, biological,

¹ An enormous amount of energy has been expended by those trying to refute this N T doctrine—pointing out exceptions such as in Lev. 5:11ff on the exclusion of poverty. The objective seems to be to blunt the exclusivity of the “no” in “no forgiveness” similar to the denial of Jesus’ claim **I am the way, the truth and the life.**

sociological and geological/astronomical tendencies are joined in the theological and moral streams towards one whole, comprehensive conclusion: the glorification of God. As diverse as they might appear, they all harmonize, or resolve in the end in Jesus Christ.

Let us walk through Gen. 8:20-22 again. Let's notice 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. The opposite is also true. Look at Proverbs 13:5:

The righteous hate what is false, but the wicked make themselves a stench and bring shame on themselves. (NIV)

The ESV renders this verse:

The righteous hates falsehood.

but the wicked brings shame* and disgrace. *The word "shame" here translates the word "stench"

Or we have Jacob's rebuke of his sons treachery toward Shechem, the Hivite, who had raped Dinah and then fallen in love with her. Jacob said to Simeon and Levi:

You have brought trouble and shame upon me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land.

Thus we see that the physical sense of smell can be harnessed to its moral sense in a negative manner. In 1 Chron. 19:6, the Ammonites realize that they have become a stench to King David and they seek to cover it up with a gift of 1,000 Talents of silver. And in 2 Samuel 16:21 Absalom is counseled to commit multiple acts of adultery, rape and perhaps even incest so that **all Israel will hear that you have made yourself a stench to your father**—which he does in a tent on the roof with his father's concubines in public view.

More pleasantly, I recollected pleasing aroma's of my own past: scents of our Christmases, 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 in heaven and 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 God said, this being immensely more significant than a shared 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. God interacts in worship with his people!!

What if that is true of all worship, even of our worship? If God responds to Noah's thanks and praise, and he attends to our 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.² 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 creation mandate 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 is good, grand, majestic, merciful and just—both righteous and holy.
- God communicates and communes with others—including us.
- God is a personal being, we share personality with him and each other
- God exists to be glorified and we exist to do that very thing.

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

² As I meditated on these things I had a stunning thought. What if the "freedom of religion" is related to "the pursuit of happiness" as "Holiness" is to the "the glory of God?" 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 holy pursuit of God," including 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)

have no moral liability and could not justly be held accountable which the judgment of the Flood clearly demonstrates that we are. 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 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 transgressed³.

So let's conclude with 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***: that response is the call to civil government as part5 of what we are to do to exercise dominion and subdue.

Amen

³ 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.