

## ***The Bible's Beginning***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 4, 2015  
based on Psalm 137*

Some years ago I was visiting my daughter in Cape Cod. Our first full day there we went to Plymouth, Massachusetts to see the landing place of the people we today call, the Pilgrims. I found out something I hadn't known before about these religious refugees. I had thought they had come to America straight from England. No, they didn't.

They first settled in Holland, which in those days (the early 1600s) was considered the most religiously tolerant nation in Europe. In order to worship as they chose, they decided to leave England to live in a foreign country without a clear idea of how they would support themselves.

The community stayed briefly in Amsterdam and then moved to the city of Leiden, where they remained for the next dozen years.

Most found work in the cloth trades, while others were carpenters, tailors and printers. They all worked, even their young children, and most things went well for them in Holland, except for one serious problem. Some of their older children were tempted by the Dutch culture. Some of them wanted to marry Dutch girls, Dutch boys. And some of them left their families to become soldiers and sailors in the Dutch military.

Their parents were afraid that they would lose their identity as English people. They hadn't counted on that. To make matters worse, the community worried that a war might break out between the Dutch and Spanish, the two great military powers of the day. So, the more radically independent of them decided to move again to North America, and we know the rest of their story.

I am bringing them up because of that temptation their children had to become Dutch – to marry outside their national origin; the temptation to surrender their ethnic identity for another.

I speak of them because the people who wrote what we now call the Old Testament had children very like these; children who fell to the very same temptations.

Here is how it happened. In the year 586 B.C. something happened that shocked the citizens of the Hebrew nation called Judah. They were at war with the pre-eminent power of the day, the Babylonians. The Babylonian army besieged the walls of their capitol city, Jerusalem. The thing that happened that shocked them was not the siege of their city, it was the fact that the Babylonians breached their walls, took their royal family hostage and burned down their most treasured possession as a people, the ancient temple of Solomon.

Nothing in their religion prepared them for defeat. In fact this people believed that their God, Yahweh, would never let such a thing happen. And then it did.

Then *something else* happened they were not prepared for. The royal family of Judah, along with all the well-off and educated among them, plus their best artisans, were rounded up and deported. They were carried off into bondage to the capitol city of Babylon – we now call it Bagdad. In its day, it was the center of the world. It had great art and architecture – a literate class. That city, founded at the intersection of two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, would come to be called the cradle of Western civilization.

But that meant nothing to these Hebrew people. Not after a 540 mile walk from Jerusalem to Bagdad. That's like walking from Beaverton to Sacramento. And this is the amazing part -- we happen to know exactly what they were thinking when they arrived in their new home. We know it because it is recorded in one of the earliest Psalms in the Bible. Number 137.

*By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.*

*For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

*How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?*

Do you get the picture? They lost a war they could not imagine God letting them lose because their priests and the court prophets (not the real ones) had guaranteed them the Babylonians would go home empty-handed. And here they were a couple of months later, defeated and depressed. Worse, they were being mocked by their captors.

“Sing us a song out of your old hymnbook,” they say. “Sing us one of the songs of Zion. Sing us ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.’” That's a good one. And they laughed.

And then the captive people ask themselves a question, “How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?”

So they hung up their harps, but that question, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land,” kept ringing in their hearts. And they decide that even if the most unthinkable thing in history has happened to them, they still couldn’t imagine being anything else but a Hebrew people, and they couldn’t imagine worshipping anything else except their one God. So here is what they say to themselves:

*If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither! away.*

*Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.*

Then they remember how the Babylonians in triumph had said of the walls of Jerusalem back home, “tear it down, tear it down!”

And that makes them furious, and they say,

*O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!*

*Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!*

Here is absolute proof that the Bible was written by human beings, right? There is nothing more human than a raw impulse for revenge.

A historian would call this Psalm a primary source. This is the kind of “raw footage” CNN would love; full of raw emotion, right?

The Babylonians take them hostage and then, after that long walk, they usher them into their city. The Hebrew people marvel at the great gates of the city. They have to admit it’s an impressive place. They are led to a prisoner of war ghetto. They are fed. They are told that soon, after a bit of re-education, they will be free to come and go within the city as they choose.

They will be able to get jobs, good ones, and live among the Babylonian people. If they want to inter-marry with their captors, well, that’s an option. The Hebrews nod, but they can’t imagine this, nor do they want to.

But in time, just as the Pilgrims in Holland watched their children learn the Dutch language and, little by little, turn into Dutch men and women before their eyes,

the same thing happens to the Hebrew speaking people in exile in their new home, Babylon.

It's like if the people in my last hometown, Salt Lake City, had been defeated by the great state of New York. And the Romney family and the Covey family get carted off in charter buses to live in the Big Apple – and the New Yorkers take the best painters and sculptors and film makers from Utah with them – and a contingent of the best dancers from Ballet West, and the whole Utah Symphony. And before they leave, they knock down the Mormon temple downtown, every stone of it.

Now, imagine what those Hebrew people in Babylon did when their children started turning into little Babylonians?

The boys would come home with a beautiful dark eyed girl and say they wanted to get married. They were simply in love, and besides, her Babylonian father had offered him a good job in the family import - export business. Everybody in both families would benefit. Well, maybe those Hebrew parents got pretty upset.

Now, it was in just that environment, with the loss of their culture at stake, that those people found a new way to undergird their cultural heritage; a new way to preserve their Hebrewness.

Their temple had been destroyed, so in the new land they would have to find something else to put at the center of their worship. And what they chose to put at the center was their story – going way back to the Exodus when the people were in bondage to another great power of the day, the Egyptians. To remember how they were freed from the Egyptians gave them hope right there where they were in exile.

They also came up with a creation story because all great cultures have them. And that story, as they told it, was a stroke of pure genius.

And here is the genius part. In that creation story which, by the way, was written down in those prisoner of war camps in Babylon, the God of the Hebrews bests all the gods of the Babylonians and also the gods of the Persian empire which, forty years after their exile, will defeat the empire of Babylon.

Here's how that plays out in Genesis chapter 1. It's done very subtly. The first chapter of Genesis is full of deities from Babylon and Persia. Those gods are depicted as light, darkness, sun, moon, birds, beasts, and fish. They are all there in Genesis chapter 1.

Speaking of those animals, if you go to the Staatliche Museum in Berlin, Germany, today you will see the original gates of ancient Babylon preserved.

Decorating those walls you will find impressive images of birds and beasts and fish – which are, in fact, graphic depictions of ancient Babylonian gods. They represent the three tiers of creation, creatures of the Sky, creatures of the Earth, and creatures of the deep blue Sea. The message of *Genesis* 1 is simple.

If you are a Hebrew and your son is in love with a Babylonian girl, and you are, therefore, tempted to bow down and worship Babylonian images of birds, beasts or fish, think about it. They were all created by the Hebrew god, Yahweh, the one and only God who happens to be the author of all of creation.

The Babylonians and the Persians will try to sell you on polytheism. They will tell you that while having one god is good, having a dozen is great. Don't believe it.

And if, in a moment of clarity, you suspect that in fact, birds are just . . . birds, and beasts are just beasts, and fish are only fish, good for you. Because, that's all they are. They. Are. Not. Gods.

Have you ever wondered what Genesis chapter one means when it says humans are to have “dominion” over the birds of the air, the beasts of the field and the fish of the sea? It means very simply that they are just creatures, they are not gods. They are **not** to be worshipped.

Yes, to have dominion over fish is to know that they are simply wonderful creatures made by God. An eagle can inspire us, an elephant is as noble a creature as one can imagine. Watching a salmon spend itself entirely to go home to spawn is a phenomenal example of selflessness, but there is no reason in the world to worship the creation over against the creator. Not even if the people who defeat your nation in battle worship them every day, and twice on Sunday.

In Genesis it says, “God called the light ‘day,’” God did not call it Ahura-mazda, which is the name of the Babylonian god of light -- so, for heaven's sake, don't worship it – it's just . . . light.

The Babylonians are saying that the sun is a god and the moon, too. Well, if, the Hebrews, in the privacy of their own hearts secretly believe that the sun is just the sun and the moon is just the moon, good for them. Because while amazing, they aren't gods at all.

Genesis 1 also goes on and on about plants, and trees, and “grain yielding seed.” Why does it say that? Is it just a list of created stuff? No. The author of Genesis is after much bigger fish. The author wants the Hebrew captives in Babylon to know that they don't have to bow down and worship at fertility cults in Babylon in order to have their crops grow.

No. Genesis says that the guarantee of perpetuity of the yield of grain is in the

seed itself – NOT in offerings made to the fertility gods of the Babylonians or Persians who want to sell them a bill of false goods.

So, you don't have to go to all the trouble of giving a tenth or more of your grain to the priests at the fertility cult temple. Because fertility is guaranteed in the seed. That's the way God ordered nature. No need to hedge your bets in the cult. That's just an expensive waste.

And look, all this is written into chapter one of Genesis, and if you don't know that it was written in exile with the threat of the loss of your culture at stake you won't ever know what it really means.

If you're looking for further evidence than this outside of Genesis, look ahead to Isaiah chapter 45 where God speaks to the king of Persia whose name is Cyrus; the king who eventually defeated the Babylonians and took over those Hebrew prisoner of war camps.

Cyrus thinks he's hot stuff. He wants the Hebrew captives to worship the gods of light *he* worships and to fear the gods of darkness *he* fears. Well, here is the Hebrew prophet Isaiah's answer to that:

*Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, king of Persia, whose right hand I have empowered . . . though he does not know me.*

*I am the LORD, and there is no other. Besides me there is no God.*

*I would have all know me, from the rising of the sun in the east, and from the west, too. I form light and create darkness. . . . I am the LORD, who does all these things.*

What am I saying? I am saying that the Bible did not come out of a vacuum. It was written down at a crucial time in history. It was written down by a people who came through hell together because of it, if only by the skin of their teeth.

The people whose temple lay behind them in ashes wrote down that creation story and other stories about their ancestors and heroes because they felt they were in a life and death struggle. If it wasn't their lives that were threatened, it was the life of their culture. It was their sophisticated belief in one god only.

This is what I mean when I say it is crucial for us to read the Bible on its own terms. But today most Christians have no clue how to do that. So they read it on the terms of people who have some theological axe to grind, or some right-wing political motive.

For example, many people say that they cannot accept the theory of evolution because they believe it goes against God or the book of Genesis. Because they believe the world was created in six 24 hour days.

That is NOT what the Genesis creation story is about. It's about a people doing their best to keep their families intact against all odds. Against a huge empire, against a culture that wants to eat their sense of themselves and their sense of their God, Yahweh, alive.

"No," they are shouting. "God is NOT some arbitrary god who wants to be constantly appeased. God is the great artist of nature who is, above all, majestic."

Now, listen to a wonderful picture of how these people think of the God who made all things good. Listen to it with the ears of those who heard it for the first time – people who were being told that the sun and moon, the stars and the birds and beasts and fish were all gods.

### **Psalm 148**

<sup>1</sup> Praise Yahweh

Praise Yahweh from the heavens;

<sup>3</sup> Praise God, sun and moon;

praise God, all you shining stars.

<sup>4</sup> Praise God, you highest heavens

<sup>5</sup> Let them praise the name of Yahweh,

for at Yahweh's command they were created,

<sup>6</sup> and Yahweh established them for ever and ever—

Yahweh issued a decree that will never pass away.

<sup>7</sup> Praise Yahweh from the earth,

you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,

<sup>8</sup> lightning and hail, snow and clouds,

stormy winds that do Yahweh's bidding,

<sup>9</sup> you mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars,

<sup>10</sup> wild animals and all cattle,

small creatures and flying birds,

<sup>11</sup> kings of the earth and all nations,

you princes and all rulers on earth,

<sup>12</sup> young men and women,

old men and children.

<sup>13</sup> Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for Yahweh's name alone is to be exalted;

Yahweh's splendor is above the earth and the heavens.

<sup>14</sup> And Yahweh has raised up for God's people a horn,

the praise of all God's faithful servants,

of Israel, the people close to Yahweh's heart. Amen