

Wednesday May 28, 2014

Where does the real Bible start?

By Jim Taylor

In writing workshops, I often assign students to write for five minutes, non-stop. They must not erase or edit or correct; they must not stop to think.

“But I never know what to write,” someone always says. Or, “I don’t know how to begin.”

“Then write that,” I would say. “And keep writing it until you find you do have something to say.”

Some filled half a page with angry scrawls. But always, at some point, they added “...because...” and amazing insights poured out.

“Now,” I told them, “ignore all the preamble. Get on with your story.”

I wonder, sometimes, what would happen if we applied that principle more universally. If, instead of prefacing our business correspondence, grant applications, and research reports with wordy introductions, we cut to the point?

Even the Bible has a preamble.

Indeed, some Christians might argue that the entire Old Testament is preamble to the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He’s all that matters.

What’s the preamble?

Scholars say that Exodus – the second “book” in the Bible -- was the first book written. That would make the whole of Genesis a preamble. Or, if you prefer film terms, a “prequel” -- something written after, about what happened before.

So where does the real story start? With the escape from Egypt? With Abraham and Sarah? With Noah?

I can’t treat the opening chapters of Genesis as anything but preamble. Simply because there was nobody there to witness it. And no writing with which to record it.

Besides, it conflicts with what we now know from science about the origins of this earth. Not the first chapter – it differs only in detail from the

broad sweep described by geology.

But the next two chapters, the Garden of Eden story, presume that everything started off perfect. And then paradise fell apart. Theologically, it's usually called "The Fall" – an explanation of how the disobedience of two proto-humans introduced sin and death to the world.

On that premise, theologians have built elaborate card castles about Original Sin, something handed down from parent to child through sex, something so powerful that we can only be freed from it by the sacrifice of someone who was absolutely sinless.

Those two chapters also provide our justification for believing that we humans were given "dominion" over the earth and all its creatures, to "fill the earth and subdue it" for our own benefit.

Weak foundation

But what if we treated those chapters simply as preamble?

Instead of striving to re-capture a perfection we never had – geologists say the early earth was a most inhospitable place – we might see ourselves on a vast, universal journey towards creating a more perfect future.

If there was no Fall, there was no need to be redeemed from it. No need for a sinless sacrifice. No need for that sinless one to return once more to set things right, forevermore.

The Garden of Eden has shaped countless stories and tales. It speaks to everyone's experience of falling short of our best intentions. So I'm not suggesting it should be excised. But I don't like having all the rest of my religious beliefs bent to fit a preamble that never actually happened.

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YOUR TURN

After reading last week's column about the term "heaven" being a means of sharpening our thinking, Steve Roney suggested I should read the Bible more carefully: "The Bible says there will be [armies in heaven]. Remember the battle of St. Michael and Satan, which seems to be going on in heaven from the

beginning of time. The angels are an army, a 'host.'

"You [also] seem to be assuming that heaven will NOT have inequalities. Why? It is clear from the Bible, and, I would argue, from logic, that it will. According to tradition, and based largely on biblical reference, there are hierarchies of angels: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, etc. Surely simple justice also requires that there be inequalities in heaven. We are not all equally good; therefore our rewards should not be equal."

Jim Henderschedt wrote, "Wow, Jim, you tackled a big one today. I find myself gravitating toward what Jesus said early on in his ministry: 'The Kingdom of God (Heaven) is near...' So, just maybe, if we wait until after we die to experience 'heaven' as Jesus saw it, we will be too late. I am of the belief that both heaven and hell are experienced during the course of one's lifetime. If there is anything after death....I guess it will be an added bonus."

Krista Markstrom put it into a personal focus: "In the past two years I have watched my father, mother and dear friend -- 83, 83, and 95 respectively when they died -- physically falter. Their physical decline has led to them feeling there's no more purpose in life for them. No reason to live. Without purpose, it's been a living hell for them on earth."

"I don't declare to know anything about the afterlife. However, observing the day-to-day frustrations of having no purpose, then it would seem a moot point to exist in any state without purpose. Ambition, desire, and needs are fed by greed and self-absorption. Purpose, however, gives us the reason to be. A reason to exist in any realm. In an ideal heaven, the truest sense of purpose would outweigh the need or desire for the best pension plan, health coverage or fastest car."

John Clinton wrote, "You ask the hypothetical question (but aren't many of life's most serious questions hypothetical?): 'Would heaven have winners and losers?' In my humble mind, Heaven will be the home for 'losers' who were declared 'winners' by the grace of God."

Ralph Milton added a succinct postscript: "A heaven full of perfect people would be hell."

Laurina Tallman agreed with me, sort of: "Certainly, Heaven cannot be 'a time,' a concept tied to the human ear-brain anatomy. As certainly, Heaven cannot

be 'a place,' although the human brain probably cannot imagine any type of existence that does not have the qualities of linear dimensions.

The other questions about what Heaven can contain are extremely useful for drawing people's attention to their earthly values and are well worth raising. I think the realization of some of those values are what is meant by the Second Coming of Jesus; which keeps me very busy in my small corner.

Laurna wanted me to explore some issues further: "'Heaven' and 'Hell' are metaphors, as is all language. 'Mother' is a set of sounds produced in a particular order. It is reproduced with different sounds in other languages. Yet in every language it means birthing, suckling, nurturing, teaching, protecting. It takes on different meanings when a particular mother fails in those essential needs of the infant and when social groups define roles around those biological events. What are the bottom-line experiences of reality that give rise to those terms 'Heaven' and 'Hell'? In what ways are those experiences similar or different? Do they apply to present life and/or only to a life hereafter? For people who have experiences such as sights and sounds of the dead, life-after-clinical-death from which they recover, etc., and to which they attach to those words, where can they get useful comparative data; how can you help them as they try to come to terms with what they think has happened to them or that may happen to them that leaves them frightened and confused?"

PSALM PARAPHRASES

For Ascension Sunday, the lectionary offers a choice of Psalm 47 or Psalm 93. I chose Psalm 47. I based this paraphrase on the common custom of rising to our feet when an important person enters the room.

- 1 Rise, please, in the presence of God.**
- 2 All other gods are pale imitations of the real thing.**
There is only one God; God is one and only.
- 3 God filled the earth with the energy we use;**
God created the resources we depend on.
God taught us to harvest the fields and to harness the animals.

4 God charted our course from us, from primitive tribes cowering in the undergrowth

to the elevators and airplanes of modern civilization.

5 Under God's guidance, all have evolved from fruit fly to eagle, from penny whistle to symphony orchestra.

6 Give the credit to God, not to our own efforts.

7 Just as corporations give credit to their chief executive, as governments give credit to the president or prime minister, so all of us should give the credit to God.

8 God sits at the head of the table.

9 At God's table, even the most powerful people take lower places.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
