

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for March 20, 2011
Lessons: Genesis 12:1-6 and Romans 4:1-5,13-17

GO FORTH

Did you know that scientists may need to rethink the law of gravity? Yes, I'm serious. Gravity has long posed a problem that frustrated Albert Einstein and has continued to frustrate many other scientists seeking to reconcile it with other prevailing theories about the natural forces in our universe. As you might imagine, the questioning of gravity has triggered many jokes, from keeping your feet firmly on the ceiling to not recognizing the gravity of the situation. Jokes aside, rethinking is something we human beings need to be prepared to do continuously throughout our lives. Science does not pass laws but merely describes and seeks to measure events or happenings in our world, theorizes to make apparent connections, and tests its theories to determine their usefulness in predicting the way things will happen. Scientists are not a cosmic legislature. What we call gravity does not have to follow any human law. It is what it is, and we do our best to describe what it is and predict how it will affect us.

I am not belittling science or scientists who have made and continue to make great progress in providing us with testable explanations of how things work in our world and even in the vastness of our expanding universe. Science helps free us from superstitions, which is no small feat because we humans are a superstitious race with a tendency to give our fears powers they cannot possibly have. We may no longer recoil from black cats, but we still avoid naming things we fear as though speaking their names might somehow bring them on. "I'm not watching my team play tomorrow, because whenever I watch them they lose." Many of us have had similar feelings ("Don't jinx me!"), but where would anyone get such power? Yet that's trivial because the Phillies will win or lose anyway, of course. The human tendency to make impossible connections grows more serious when children think they have caused harm to a loved one or even death by thinking angry thoughts or when adults behave as though getting a checkup could cause a disease. or when we blame the presence of a group of outsiders for our problems. So far science has not been able to liberate us from our habit of making improbable and even impossible connections between cause and effect.

Many young people are turning away from religion in general and Christian faith in particular because they equate God and religious practices with superstition. Unfortunately, in our zeal to "prove" God and persuade people to practice Christianity for their own sake, we have countless times played to their superstitious tendencies. Christians have even set

themselves in opposition to science, as though systematically observing and measuring events in the world God created could somehow lead us to a truth that disproves God's truth. How could that be, when God created the universe? Yes, scientific observations have compelled us to rethink some of our understandings of the nature of the Bible's witness to God's truth and the validity of our ways of interpreting the Bible. In my experience, such forced rethinking has helped rather than harmed biblical understanding and faith in God. So the genealogical tables in Genesis do not add up to anything even close to historical accuracy in determining the age of the human race, so what? We were asking them to do something inconceivable to the ancient Israelites, something for which they were never intended. We misunderstood. Yes, science forced us to grow up in our ways of reading and seeking to understand the Bible. Good. What we really lost was Christian authoritarianism wrongly basing itself upon the Bible. We gained a greater openness to the word and truth of God.

I want to make these two points clearly. Claiming to reject God on the basis of modern science is utterly unscientific. Likewise, trying to prove God with modern science is utterly unscientific. If we are going to disbelieve or to believe, we need to do so honestly. Science is incapable of proving or disproving God's love for us, and that's the issue for faith. As followers of Jesus, we do not believe in God because we need a handy explanation of the world or the universe around us; we believe in God because in Jesus Christ, God's redemptive love has laid claim to us, made us its own, and given to us a newness of life and a hope for ourselves and for this world and that nothing which happens today or might happen tomorrow can take from us.

God's truth is not a divine Book of Knowledge or a fact checker about all the world. God's truth is redemptive love that restores us to God, other people, and our very selves in the relatedness for which God created us but from which we have consistently turned away in our search for autonomy. We are not made to live alone in and for ourselves. We are created to be loved and to love, to care, and to seek justice, peace, and wholeness for each other rather than just advantage for ourselves.

It used to be common practice to conclude worship services by telling people who seek God's blessing to "go forth" and serve Jesus Christ in the world. The phrase "go forth" has become somewhat outdated; it sounds churchy these days, and we may find ourselves saying instead, "go out." Well, the two phrases mean almost the same but not quite. "Forth" is related to "forward." Christ calls us forward in life. God sends Abram and Sarai forward toward a new land – not just out of Haran but toward someplace in life that will be an advance in God's grace for them and for all the families of the earth.

The apostle Paul argues at great length that we human beings all need to be set right with God by God's undeserved mercy and unearned love. Nothing else, certainly no

goodness or virtue of our own, will set us right. Actually, “undeserved mercy” is a deliberate redundancy; if it were deserved, it would not be mercy. “Unearned love” is blatantly redundant because if it has to be earned and lasts only as long as it is merited, then it is not love. Here is the truth we need to learn, the truth the Bible tells us, the very truth of God that calls us to open ourselves in trust to life as God’s people. *Let yourself be loved by God*, and that faith in God’s grace will set you free to let yourself be loved by other people, allowing them to care about you and allowing you to care about them and to need them. God created us with need for each other, but how we rebel against that very idea because it seems to us in our fake autonomy to indicate weakness and dependency. Needing other people makes us vulnerable. Yes, and in that vulnerability lies our greatest strength. Love’s vulnerability is the weakness of God that is stronger than human strength.

Have you never wondered why, when there is already so much difficulty in life and trouble in our world, people persist in going out of their way to make more trouble for each other? Isn’t life hard enough? Meanness and pettiness are marks of our alienation. Wanting to be strong, we feel shame at our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and so we take out our shame on each other, as though shaming someone else might help. The whole function of bigotry, whether it is racism or gender superiority or religious snobbery, is to enable people hiding their shame at being merely human to try to make themselves feel better by heaping scorn and disgust upon someone else. If we were at peace with ourselves, we would have no need for bigotry and would have nothing to gain by putting other people down.

In Jesus, God became vulnerable to us. Or, more truly I think, Jesus made physically present and painfully apparent the vulnerability God has always had to our responses because God loves us. What hurts us hurts God. What we do to hurt each other hurts God doubly, for what it does to the victim and for what it does to the one being cruel.

If what I am saying seems to make God sound weak and pathetic, that is because we don’t know what real strength is. We wrongly imagine strength to be autonomy – needing no one, answering to no one, being vulnerable to no one, being always and completely in charge and in control. That’s not God’s strength at all, and that kind of autonomy is truly pathetic.

Now Jesus Christ calls us to go forward in truth – in that very particular truth which is self-giving, redemptive love. God’s Spirit lets us rest but not stagnate. God sent Abraham and Sarah out of Haran to a new land of promise, not just for their own sake, but for all the families of the earth. So, whatever God wants going forward to mean for you or me or us together as a church, we look to the future with hope because God fills it with promise. Go forth in that hope, trusting God whose love we know in Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us. Amen.