

In the Beginning, God...In the Present, God...In the End, God
Pastor Bill Chadwick
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Genesis 1:1, 31 and Romans 8: 31, 35, 37-39

It has been a long and interesting process, this “mating dance” between search committee and minister. This morning’s scenario was very hard for me to imagine six months ago, but I am delighted that God’s imagination is richer than mine and I am now thoroughly excited about the possibility of being one of your pastors and the potential that we have as a congregation for ministry together. I don’t know many of you very well. I know a fair number of you a tiny little bit from a LONG time ago. But you—members and staff—have a wonderful reputation for faithful service. I am very honored to be at this point in the process.

In this sermon I will touch briefly on some of the basics of my personal understanding of the Christian life as a way for you to get to know me better.

In the beginning, God...in the present, God...and in the end, God,... though in the life of faith, beginning, present and end are intertwined and spiral in and out of one another.

In the beginning, God. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And God saw that it was good.

What an amazing, awesome, astonishing creation God has fashioned!

I will never forget my first time in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. I was a counselor with the senior high youth of this congregation. After supper and dishes everyone was gathered around the campfire chatting. I slipped down to the water’s edge alone. The sun had set. Wind had died down. Mist rising from the glassy lake. A full moon, giant and orange, rising through the trees. Loons calling to one another with their maniacal laughter. “Wow! Good job, God.”

As much as I cherish Minnesota’s lakes, snorkeling in the ocean is a whole ‘nother world, with the incredible fish, coral and plant life with bizarre shapes and psychedelic colors. Mind-boggling. “Good job, God!”

Growing up in a farm family, I have a deep appreciation for the miracle of food production: the complex interaction of soil, sun, rain, fertilizer and bees. Biting into a fresh ear of sweet corn, with butter dripping down my chin. “Wow! Good job, God... and Cal.”

I lived for a year in the Cascade Mountain wilderness of Washington state. Outside my back door was a 7000’ mountain sparkling with snow-jewels. Looking out my bedroom window I could watch spotted twin fawns browsing next to the gurgling, trout-filled brook. The night sky, unpolluted by metropolitan smog and lights, was dazzling. “Whoa! Good job, God!”

That night sky. A hundred billion stars in our galaxy. And perhaps 200 billion galaxies in the universe. It leaves me speechless.

Final example. A number of years ago I heard a physician from UCLA speaking on public radio. He said, “We aren’t usually conscious of what goes on inside our bodies. We don’t feel the blood coursing through our veins. We aren’t aware of cells reproducing, of antibodies fighting off infection, and so on. And it’s a good thing,” he said. “For if we were aware of all that, we would spend all our time in awe, wonder and celebration and never get anything else done.” That was not a religious program. It was a physician speaking on public radio.

“If we were aware of all that is going on inside our bodies,” he said, “we would spend all our time in awe, wonder and celebration and never get anything else done.”

Yet it is entirely appropriate to spend part of our time in awe, wonder and celebration. For I believe a major reason we humans were created is for the task of appreciating God's handiwork.

And, of course, in Genesis 1 we read that God has entrusted the care of the earth to humankind, for careful stewardship. We celebrated Earth Day this past Wednesday, and as many have noted, really "Every day is Earth Day."

So, God as Creator is a significant aspect of my theology. In the beginning, God.

Yet the cornerstone of my faith is God as made known through Jesus of Nazareth.

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we have a window into the heart of God. A lifetime is too short to savor the significance of Jesus. So just a few tidbits.

This furniture-maker from Nazareth is recognized—by nonbelievers as well as believers—as having been one of the world's foremost moral teachers of all time. Similarly, he has proven to be a powerful example for the manner in which he conducted his life, possessing authority and power yet choosing the way of humility, servanthood and suffering love.

But the primary significance, the life-changing significance of Jesus does not reside in what *was* two millennia ago, but what *is* this moment, April 26, 2009, in Bloomington, Minnesota. That Jesus is not dead, but is risen to rule the world, and is present in our present this moment.

The Risen Christ invites us to be in relationship. As I explain it, all we have to do is to give as much as we know of ourselves to as much as we know of God as revealed through Christ. And through God's grace we know forgiveness, freedom, life; life in its fullness and power.

The essence of life in Christ is that we do not face life alone.

I want to share a personal story. But two prefatory notes. (1) I don't want to give you the impression that I have a lot of mystical, "spiritual" experiences. I'm a very ordinary guy. You might not get that impression from the brochure the PNC sent out. I thought perhaps there should be a paragraph written by my family with "the rest of the story." (2) I recognize that there are other ways of understanding this event that I'm going to relate, but I am going to give you my interpretation, my experience.

My dad was a farmer. After 70 years of physical labor his hip joints were shot. We finally convinced him to have a hip replacement and it went swimmingly. Dad was up walking with crutches the same day as surgery. He was quickly out of the hospital and made a great recovery. So when it came time for the other hip to be replaced we expected similar smooth sailing. But no. In short, it was Murphy's Law of surgery. Everything that could go wrong, did. He was in extreme pain. But after a few days things seemed to start heading the right direction. Now I was in Stillwater at the time. (That doesn't sound good. While I was serving the Presbyterian Church in Stillwater and my younger brother, John, was at Gustavus, my dad used to say, "Yep, I got one son in Stillwater and the other in St. Peter. I'm not doing too well.") Anyhow, Dad was in Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park. I lived in Stillwater and all three of my siblings lived in Bloomington. I knew they were keeping close tabs on things and it had been a few days since I had made the trip across town to the hospital. I was at work at the Stillwater Church one afternoon when my older brother, Cal, called and suggested I try to visit Dad again soon. I left work and drove across town to Methodist Hospital, walked up five flights of stairs, down the hall, turned into the room, looked at Dad's face, and my blood ran cold. I couldn't breathe.

After a few years of hospital calling you can tell if someone is getting better or if someone is dying. It was clear from the look on my dad's face, and for that matter, my mom's, that Dad was in the wrong category. And no matter how much hospital experience you have, if it's your own dad, it's

different. I was frozen in shock. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't speak for a bit...After a few minutes of forced chit-chat I suggested we pray together and they were all for that. Mom sat on one side of the bed and I stood on the other and the three of us held hands. I prayed something like this, "Dear Jesus, you made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, and the lame to walk. Please heal Dad." And that hospital room was filled with the presence of Jesus. The fear and tension that had imprisoned all three of us was replaced by calm and relaxation. There was a palpable presence of grace. It felt exactly like there were now four of us holding hands and I was truly surprised when I opened my eyes not to literally see Jesus. It was that powerful.

From that moment, Dad began to get better.

But that's not the point. Dad getting better was not the point, because suddenly it didn't matter any more if Dad got better or not. Because Jesus was there. That's all that mattered. Jesus was there. A few years later Dad died from something else. And Jesus was *there*.

As Paul wrote in Romans, "If God is for us, who can be against us...I am convinced that there is *nothing* that can separate us—nothing in this life, nothing in the next—that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In the beginning, God. In the present, God. And in the end, God.

Andrew Young tells this story. Remember Andrew Young? A partner of Martin Luther King's in the Civil Rights movement, he went on to serve as US Ambassador to the United Nations and later mayor of Atlanta. (He is also a UCC minister.) He tells the story of one Saturday morning in which he got his chores done early so he could sit down to enjoy watching his friend Arthur Ashe play tennis on TV in an important match. But his kids, who were young at the time, kept roaring around the house making a lot of racket. A couple of times he shushed them and then they came charging through again. "Stop it!" Young cried. "Let me explain. I'm trying to watch our friend Arthur play tennis. I want to see who wins."

His son looked up at him and said, "Dad, it's a tape. Arthur won."

The victory was won for us 2000 years ago. We know how the match turns out. In the end, God.

The resurrection of Jesus is, among other things, God's giant stamp of approval on Jesus' life and ministry and teaching.

It is God's YES to the Sermon on the Mount. Yes, we are to love not just our neighbors, but our enemies.

The Resurrection is God's Yes to Jesus' kingdom of inclusion:

Yes, God loves not just righteous, Jewish males. God loves Gentiles and women and children and sinners, like you and me.

The Resurrection demonstrates that ultimately
suffering love is more powerful than hatred,
forgiveness is more powerful than violence
life is more powerful than death.

Knowing how things turn out we can live as Easter people aligning ourselves with life and love, doing justice, acting mercifully and walking humbly with our God.

To God be the honor and glory and praise, now and forever. Amen!

What does Jesus' resurrection mean for the world?

It means Jesus was right. It is God's stamp of approval on Jesus' ministry. It's a giant YES to Jesus' life, to Jesus' teaching—

The Resurrection says YES to Jesus' servanthood,

YES to Jesus' kingdom of inclusion,

YES to Jesus' faithfulness even to a cross.

As followers of this resurrected Christ, as the very body of Christ in the world today, will we be Easter people?

Or will we follow Madison Avenue and the values of the world?

The world says: He who dies with the most toys wins

The world says: Look out for number one

The world says shareholder return is more important than protecting the environment.

The world says sweatshops and child labor are okay if we can turn a slightly larger short term profit.

The world says protect what you have at all costs, with giant fences at your borders, with a trillion dollar military budget, with the sacrifice of your beautiful young men and women.

The world says plop yourself down in front of your TV and watch sports, American Idol, Dancing with the Stars, the Girls Next Door, or any other junk as long as you buy our products.

The world says the bottom line is the bottom line.

In short, the world gives us a culture of domination and death.

The Resurrection, on the other hand, says

YES to the beatitudes, Yes to loving our enemies, Yes to caring for the poor, yes to forgiving others and ourselves.

President Abraham Lincoln would often worship on Sunday nights at one of the churches in Washington D.C. Because he did not want to cause a commotion by his presence, the pastor left the sacristy door open, and the President sat in that small room and listened to the sermon. One evening, Lincoln was walking back to the White House, his aide commented "The pastor preached a great sermon tonight, Mr. President." And after a slight pause, Lincoln responded "No, the pastor did not preach a great sermon because he did not challenge me to do great things."

I am challenging you—and me—to live as Easter people. Not by the values of the surrounding culture, but by the values of the Resurrected Christ.

As the biblical scholar Marcus Borg often says, Easter means not only "Jesus lives," but the more political, "Jesus is Lord." Jesus not only is raised from the dead but also reigns. "Jesus is raised" is a statement, not only about life after death but also about life in all of its dimensions here and now, about who is in charge. When the skies darken and things get difficult, it is powerful freedom to know who reigns.

Powerful freedom to know who reigns.

So I challenge us to be Easter people. In a world too often filled with death and darkness, let us align ourselves with the winning side, the side of light and life and love. Amen.