

“A Big Answer”
Ephesians 1:3-14/Exodus 3:7-15
FPC/January 17, 2010
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

This past week I was reminded of an old story about a Sunday School class of 1st and 2nd graders. The teacher had read the story of Moses asking God God’s name (one of our texts this morning). The teacher then asked the students to color a picture about the story. As she walked among the students coloring she saw 6 and 7 year olds coloring Moses. She then saw a picture that a little girl was coloring that was very different. The little girl, Megan, was full of energy, and often very creative. As the teacher continued to watch, she couldn’t tell what Megan was coloring, so she asked, “What are you coloring Megan?” In a very manner of fact tone Megan said, “God. I’m coloring a picture of God.” The teacher said, “But Megan, God’s name YHWH means that ‘I will be who I will be.’ That means we can’t know what God looks like.” Without looking up Megan said, “Well we will when I’m done.” And, indeed, the class did.

So what is God like? If I were to hand out paper and crayons, what picture might you draw? As we begin our brief sermon series in Ephesians, our text this morning gives us some big answers.

II. Text

Read Ephesians 1:3-14.

III. Brief Exegesis

As I was reading and working on this text this week it felt like jumping out of a plane at 20,000 feet, and after I parachuted down, landing in a strange land. This is a difficult text. The sentences are long, and the ideas and images pile up on each other. I had to go back and reread it a number of times, outlining the ideas. This text isn’t easy. But it is rich in its theology.....rich in images and ideas.....rich in its answer to the question; what is God like? And then I began to notice something else (do you know what?); we are “smack dab” in the middle of the land of Presbyterian/or Reformed/or Calvinist theology. This text is our theological heritage. This is our rich tradition. This is our home. In a world of shallow answers to the question ‘what is God like?’, we have landed in our deep, rich and beautiful home country. This is our theology. This is our text. It’s not easy. But let’s “roll up our sleeves” and see what we find. You have an insert to help you find your way (see in appendix).

Overall this text has the feel and style of a “good news” announcement. It’s as if it’s saying “Praise God. Praise God for the great blessings the holy God has showered

on us.” It’s a type of benediction; an announcement of the great grace God has shown us.

In the first section the writer announces; God the Father freely chooses us in grace. Before the foundation of the world.....before the creation of time and space....before God said, “Let there be light”.....God freely chooses us in grace to be in eternal relationship with God, and to receive in God’s time every spiritual blessing. In this text we get a hint at these blessings; adoption into God’s people, redemption from sin and death, forgiveness, new life in the new creation, the gift of God’s Holy Spirit. But the point is; God first chooses us before creation ever started....before any of us were born.....before we can act, or sin, or believe. Our salvation is grounded in the free choice of God for us. There’s nothing here about limits and boundaries..... nothing about who’s in and who’s out.....nothing about God predestining some to heaven and some to hell. The free choice of God for us is open ended. The intention is for countless children of God. The creator of the universe has chosen us, and God’s will can be trusted.

I have some good friends in Cranberry. Rob and Tanya are a great couple. They are full of faith and love. They are leaders in their church. And they wanted to become parents. But after years of doing “whatever it took,” they discovered they could not have children. But they had love they wanted to share.....so they decided to what some couples do; they decided to adopt. It was not an easy or cheap process, but they went through all the interviews, evaluations, forms, and frustration. And they did it before they ever saw or met or held a child that might be their own. They freely chose to adopt a child in love before the child was ever born. The adoption of their children began when Bob and Toni first chose to express their love through adoption.

That’s the point here. What’s God like? God is the One who freely chooses to adopt us before the foundations of the world. The holy, eternal, creator God chooses us to become children of God.....the people of God.....the ones in God’s time to receive the blessings in eternity that God has for us. That is a big God.

So first, God the Father freely chooses us in grace. The writer goes on to announce; God the Son freely acts for us in grace. The choice of God before the dawn of creation comes to be in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ we are shown the great love of God. In Jesus Christ there is redemption from the power of death, and forgiveness for the guilt of sin. In Jesus Christ we are shown how to live in the coming kingdom of God. In Jesus Christ all creation and heaven will be gathered up before God in the new creation. In Jesus Christ creation is brought to God, and God is brought to creation. Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and creation who makes God’s great choice for us happen. The promise of God for us before the first light of creation shined comes to be in Jesus Christ. And we only

become part of God's great choice for us.....we only become Christians and a part of God's people.....we only have a future in the coming kingdom of God, because of Jesus Christ.

Long before my friends Rob and Tanya saw, met or held a child they might adopt, they made the choice to love a child. But that was not enough. To fulfill the choice they needed someone, or some agency, to make it happen. They needed someone to bring them to a child, and a child to them. They needed a mediator between their promise to share love, and a child that needed love.

In a similar way Jesus Christ is the mediator between the choice of God's love for us, and our need for the love of God. Jesus Christ puts God's great promise for us into action. And because only God could do that, we have the mystery of the incarnation; in some way we can't fully comprehend God the Father who freely chooses us in grace is also God the Son who freely acts for us in grace. That is a big God.

Finally, the writer announces; God the Holy Spirit freely seals the promise in grace. The presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and world is the demonstration of God's choice for us. By the power of the Holy Spirit we hear the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and believe. By the power of the Holy Spirit our lives are transformed, becoming more like Jesus' life, and scattered people ("Red and yellow, black and white") discover a new unity as Christians. The way of our new lives, and the way of our life together, is different than the world around us (do you know why?)..... because it bears witness to the coming new creation. "This world is not our home, we're just a passing through".....and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is the sign of God's great promise for us.

Rob and Tanya did welcome a child into their lives. And, in fact, a few years later they adopted a second child from South Korea. The children were welcomed into their home, and are now loved and share in their parents Christian faith. The kids are doing very well. Their lives are very different than they might have been in a South Korean orphanage. The great choice Bob and Toni made years ago is now being worked out in the daily acts of love, guidance, discipline and encouragement. And the love these two kids experience every day is a seal, a promise, that their futures are filled with great things.

So the work of God the Holy Spirit in our lives is a seal, a promise, that our future is filled with the great things of God. That is a big God.

So God as Father freely chooses us. And God as Son freely acts for us. And God as Holy Spirit freely seals God's promise for us. It's all done in grace. It's all dependent on God. One final, brief thought (perhaps you've already thought about this question); what about freedom? Let's go back to Rob and Tanya, and their kids. Rob and Tanya have chosen, acted and patiently cared for their kids, all in love. It's all been

done for the kids. The kids haven't had to earn anything. But they do have to choose. They have to decide if they trust the love they have been shown. They have to decide if they trust the guidance they are given. And in time they could choose to rebel. They could walk away from the love and care of Rob and Tanya. They could walk away from the promise of their good future. It would break their parents' hearts, but they could do that.....they could freely choose that. And if that were to happen, I know Rob and Tanya would continue to choose to love their child, never giving up hope that the prodigal child would someday come home, and live into the great future that is their own.

So it is with God. We haven't had to earn any of the great blessing God has for us. It's all been done for us. But we do have freedom to choose. We have to choose to trust God's love. We have to choose to trust God's direction for our lives. And at times we choose to rebel.....maybe breaking God's heart.....traveling to a distant way of life away from God. We can choose that. We have freedom. But God never gives up hope that someday the prodigal child will come home.....and claim the wonderful future that is his or her own. Maybe you know that journey. That is a big God.

IV. Final Reflections

So what is God like? Who is God? Is God like the grandmother who slips her grandson \$20, and just wants him to be happy? No, that god is too small. Is God like a vending machine, so that if you say this certain prayer, or act this certain way, you can get what you want? No, that god is too small. Is God like a police officer following your car through town, waiting for you to make a mistake so to give you a ticket? No, that god is too small. Is God a Republican, or Democrat, or American? No, or course not...that god is too small. All of these gods are too small, and yet it's a sad truth that this is what many people have come to believe. So it's no wonder that God and belief have such a small part in many people's lives; their gods are too small.

At the burning bush Moses ask God God's name. A name in that culture was believed to be like the little girl coloring a picture of God; limiting, and a reflection of our own perceptions. But God does give a name; YHWH. It means "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." It is opened ended, limitless, unbound. God will not be limited in a name, or an idol, or a picture. God will choose how to be revealed. God will choose to save the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. God will generations later choose to save the Hebrews from captivity in Babylon. God chooses to save us before the creation of the world, save us in Jesus Christ, and seal God's eternal promise to us in the Holy Spirit. That is a big God. That is a God big enough to love, believe, and trust.

"I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art. My only trust, and Savior of my heart." So 16th C Reformer John Calvin writes in a great hymn of the church. Caricatures about

Calvin abound; cold, stern, intolerant, judgmental, academic. But they are just that, caricatures. Rather this hymn tells us much about Calvin; in all the uncertainties and chaos of life, Calvin simply chooses to trust the one eternal God, and the promise of salvation before the first light of creation. What is God like? Calvin shares a big answer. (Sing #457)

I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art

*I greet Thee, who my sure Redeemer art,
My only trust and Savior of my heart,
Who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;
I pray Thee from our hearts all cares to take.*

*Thou art the King of mercy and of grace,
Reigning omnipotent in every place;
So come, O King, and our whole sway;
Shine on us with the light of Thy pure day.*

*Thou are the life, by which alone we live,
And all our substance and our strength receive;
Sustain us by Thy faith and by Thy power,
And give us strength in every trying hour.*

*Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness
No harshness hast Thou and no bitterness;
O grant to us the grace we find in Thee,
That we may dwell in perfect unity.*

*Our hope is in no other save in Thee;
Our faith is built upon Thy promise free;
Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,
That in Thy strength we evermore endure.*

(#457 Presbyterian Hymnal)

V. Appendix: Insert in Bulletin

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Introduction: The form and tone of the text is a benediction. It invites people to hear about the great benefactions (benefits of God’s grace) with which God has blessed us. It is a big answer to the question; what is God like?

A. God the Father Freely Chooses in Grace (1:3-6)

Before the first light of creation God freely chose in love to adopt us as God’s people, and to make us heirs to the eternal promises of God. There are no limits to the promise. The intention is have countless children of God. God chooses us before we can act, believe or sin.

B. God the Son Freely Acts in Grace (1:7-10)

Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and creation to make God’s great promise happen. He is the mediator between God’s great love and promise of redemption, and our need for God’s love and redemption. Only God can do this. So God the Father who freely chooses us in grace is also God the Son who freely acts for us in grace (incarnation).

C. God the Holy Spirit Freely Seals the Promise in Grace (1:11-14)

By the power and presence of the Holy Spirit we hear the gospel and believe. By the power and presence of the Holy Spirit our lives are transformed to become more like Jesus’ life, and divided people (“Red and yellow, black and white) are united under a new identity; Christian. The way of our new lives, and our life together, is different than the world around us, because it bears witness to our coming life in the eternal promise of God. The gift of the Spirit now seals the promise of God’s future for us.

A question: What about freedom?

We haven’t had to earn any of the great blessing God has for us. It’s all been done for us. But we do have freedom to choose. We have to choose to trust God’s love. We have to choose to trust God’s direction for our lives. And at times we choose to rebel.....maybe breaking God’s heart.....traveling to a distant way of life away from God. We can choose that. We have freedom. But God never gives up hope that someday the prodigal child will come home.....and claim the wonderful future that is his or her own. That is a big God.

Conclusion: So what is God like? Who is God? Is God like the grandmother who slips her grandson \$20, and just wants him to be happy? No, that god is too small. Is God like a vending machine, so that if you say this certain prayer, or act this certain way, you can get what you want? No, that god is too small. Is God like a police officer following your car through town, waiting for you to make a mistake so to give you a ticket? No, that god is too small. Is God a Republican, or Democrat, or American? No, that god is too small. All of these gods are too small, and yet it's a sad truth that this is what many people have come to believe. So it's no wonder that God and belief have such a small part in many people's lives; their gods are too small.

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