

“Beauty and the Beast”

Genesis 1:26-27

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
September 24, 2006

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our own image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created them” Genesis 1:26-27.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Our young people will ponder this question in coming months. This year the theme of our youth program is I.M.A.G.E., and as you would expect, it comes from this text that is the culmination of the Priestly account of creation. I would like to add to their discussion by sharing some thoughts and ideas. Even if you are not involved in our youth program as a participant or leader, I encourage you to give attention to this important question. Doing so will enhance your spiritual pilgrimage.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? **It means that it is no accident that we are here.** “So God **created** man in His own image, in the image of God He **created** them.” We are here because someone wanted us here and made it possible. This humbles me and makes me grateful. It also gives me a sense of purpose and security.

I remember the time I heard Dr. John Claypool share his thoughts about creation. His moving description touched me deeply. They are recorded in his book, The Hopeful Heart.

“The first step in understanding hope is to acknowledge the deep mystery that pervades all human existence, a mystery that should call forth in us a stance of genuine humility. Here we are, in a world that we did not create, surrounded by much that we neither understand nor comprehend. The Psalmist reminds us, ‘It is God who has made us and not we ourselves,’ which is to say that we are radically contingent beings. After all, we did not will ourselves into this world, nor did we set into motion this incredible process of history in which we find ourselves. There is so much that makes up this existence of ours that we cannot explain, so much that we do not have the intellectual capacity to comprehend. Thus, the humility that is implied by saying, ‘We know in part and we see through a glass darkly’ is actually an acceptance of the fact that mystery is the true context of our lives.”

Continuing he wrote, “What is the Great Story? You have probably heard it many times. It begins in that time before time when there was nothing except God, nothing except this Mystery that is life and has power to give life. Sometime long ago, something utterly momentous must have happened in the heart of this Mystery we call God. The Mystery must have said, ‘This wonder of aliveness that I am is simply too good to keep to Myself. I want others to taste the ecstasy of being and having and doing. I want others to share in the utter joy of what I am and what I have.’ This constitutes the first movement in the Great Story of Holy Scripture, namely, the Holy One choosing to become the Generous One. You realize, do you not, that this is why all of us are here today. We did not call ourselves into being out of nothingness. As creatures it is our nature to receive life, and if it were not for the generosity of the Holy One we would not exist, a word that means literally to ‘stand out of nothingness.’”

We are not here by chance. We are the result of the intent and design of a generous God that values life and relationship. How grateful I am for His goodness and faithfulness.

To be created in the image of God means that we need to quit trying to create God in our image. We need to quit building idols that fail us and live by faith trusting in a God that will love, nurture, encourage, comfort, guide, empower and sustain us.

Did you see the movie “Bruce Almighty,” starring Morgan Freeman as God and Jim Carrey as Bruce Nolan, an egotistical television reporter from Buffalo. In response to Bruce’s cynical provocations, God allowed Bruce to take His place for a period of time. The film was

filled with quick wit and deep symbolism. My favorite line came from Bruce at a time of great frustration when he asked God, "How do you get people to love you?" That's a topic for another time.

For our purpose today, though, do you recall how God was portrayed in this movie? He was a janitor in a large warehouse. The first time you see God, he is mopping a floor. This caught Bruce completely off guard and led to even more skepticism. This was not his image of God at all and he was unwilling to accept this God until he got to know Him. Distrust moved to acceptance after Bruce released his expectations and embraced the goodness and faithfulness of God.

It is natural to formulate an image of God and place expectations upon Him. It is also normal to want Him to validate our assumptions and satisfy our expectations. This is so dangerous, though. In so doing, we can miss God completely, fail to see where he is at work in the world and miss the opportunity to partner with Him in that work.

Recently I received an email that deals with this topic. Let me share it with you. "If you want to find God, the gospel tells us not to look for Him in the impressive and successful places where great accomplishments are on display. These are wonderful and valuable. If you are looking for examples of creativity and human ingenuity, go look in the storehouses of human accomplishment, for in them there is much to see. However, if it is God you are looking for, go look in the places where people are giving themselves away, in the countless ways that people do that, big and small.

Here is a word of warning, though. The gospel tells us you probably won't find there the God you were looking for, because that particular god, which is really an idol, is the one that sanctifies success, glorifies accomplishment and operates according to what you want and think you need. No, when you look in those places where people are giving themselves away, you probably won't find the God you were looking for, but chances are pretty good that you will find the One that has been looking for you. That God, however, is One with a different agenda, who embraces your success and failure, who invites your strength and your weakness into a partnership of redeeming and healing the brokenness that finds its way into every corner of God's good creation."

Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament scholar and long-time professor at the University of Heidelberg, encouraged his students not to give in to the tendency to make God in their image but rather embrace the affirmation that they were created in His image. This is good advice for us, too. Let God be God and reveal Himself to you in His own time as you study His word, relate to others, give yourself away and experience life. Trust this God and follow Him by faith.

To be created in the image of God means that we should be able to do the difficult. We are not merely physical beings. We are also spiritual, which means we have the potential for living on a higher level than the other animals that God created. As spiritual beings, we are capable of living by the ethic of love, which produces communities built upon justice and peace.

We have no better example of this than Jesus. This one who, as Paul told the Colossians, was the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation," showed us what it was like to do the difficult, take the high road and live by the ethic of sacrificial and unconditional love.

Repeatedly he chose love over hate, forgiveness over retaliation, generosity over greed, justice over injustice, truth over deceit, wisdom over folly, peace over turmoil, courage over fear, commitment over broken promises, peacemaking over violence, sacrifice over selfishness and life over death. He took advantage of every opportunity to build bridges between people rather than barriers. Truly he loved God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength and lived by the Golden Rule. He knew that relationships and stewardship would demand nothing less of him. No wonder Paul paid him this high compliment and declared him our role model.

The writer of Genesis reminds us that we are also created in the image of God and need to reflect the goodness of God in our daily lives. As we enter into relationships with one another and partner with God to manage the environment, we, too, need to be willing to do the difficult and live grace-filled lives. Every decision we make needs to give the world a clearer picture of

the God that created it and the world He envisions. Each decision should lead us closer to providing a safe place for children to grow up and adults to grow old.

When two of Motti Taman's brothers were killed by a Hezbollah rocket, the Israeli asked that his brothers' eyes be available for a transplant. One of the recipients was an Arab, Nikola Elias, who was blind in one eye and had little vision in the other. After the transplant occurred, the two men met, one an Israeli and the other an Arab. They shook hands, expressed their pleasure over the success of the transplant and exchanged phone numbers. This is what it means to be created in the image of God and live by the ethic of love, building bridges instead of barriers.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel, the twentieth-century Jewish philosopher writes, "Man is a little lower than the angels and a little higher than the beasts. Like a pendulum he swings to and fro under the combined action of gravity and momentum, of the gravitation of selfishness and the momentum of the divine."

Jesus showed us what it means to live by the motivation of the divine, to choose beauty over the beast. As his disciples, let us follow his example, fulfilling the writer's purpose in telling us that we have been created in the image of God.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? It means God loves me and wants me to enjoy life as He does. It means I need to develop a relationship with God based upon trust and faith, letting Him reveal His identity as we journey together. It means I need to partner with Him to make my home, community and world places where justice is relentlessly pursued, love impacts all decisions and peace prevails.

Will you join me in this endeavor? Will you honor God with your decisions and give your neighbors a clearer vision of who He is? With His help, will you take the high road and do the difficult as you partner with Him to make the world better? Will you be a faithful steward of your relationships and resources? I hope so and so does a confused and hurting world.