



“The Secret of Life: 8. Catching a Glimpse of God”

Text: Genesis 1:26-2:2

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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The war had been brutal. The Portuguese had been making war against the Kongo and Ndongo kingdoms in Angola. Prisoners had been taken and marched anywhere from 100 to 200 miles to the port of Luanda, where they were loaded onto the ship *San Juan Bautista*. They were bound for Vera Cruz, on the coast of Mexico, in the summer of 1619. As the *San Juan Bautista* neared Vera Cruz, two ships, the *White Lion* and the *Treasure*, captained by English privateers, attacked and off-loaded 50-60 African prisoners.

Near the end of August, in 1619, the *White Lion* appeared on the horizon, near present-day Hampton, Virginia. She sailed into port, where John Rolfe, a prominent Virginia plantation owner and merchant (and the former husband of Pocahontas) traded food supplies for “20 Negroes.” The rest of the Angolan prisoners were acquired by other plantation owners, including Governor Sir George Yeardley.

400 years ago, the first African slaves were brought to these shores, beginning an ignominious history of pain and prejudice that continues to this day.

Long before those first African slaves were brought to the Americas, and long before the plantation owners paid to receive them, when the first explorers came to this continent, they were met by people and civilizations that had been here for centuries. The indigenous peoples of the Americas were summarily evicted from their homelands, hunted down like animals, and have been portrayed as villains and worse in American folklore. Forced to live in the squalid conditions of places we refer to as “reservations,” these noble people were robbed of their dignity and their sense of self-value.

Ninety-nine years ago, women earned the right to vote. A slight correction to that traditional history lesson. Ninety-nine years ago, *white* women earned the right to vote.

The descendants of those first African slaves - male and female - while set free from slavery by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863 - did not earn the universal right to vote until 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law. It was designed to guarantee the rights of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution for all Americans, especially those of racial minorities in the South.

The question that begs to be asked is, why were those situations allowed to be? What prompted white owners to purchase and own black slaves? Why were Native Americans labeled “savages” and sent to internment camps? Why were women denied the right to vote? Why did it take nearly 350 years before the descendants of African slaves were afforded the fullness of citizenship in this country?

The answer is disturbing. The answer is that African slaves, Native Americans, women, and the descendants of African slaves were considered less than human. At the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the question addressed was how would slaves be counted in the census to determine Congressional representation for a state. The compromise was that three-out-of-five slaves would be counted, effectively saying that a slave was $\frac{3}{5}$ ths of a human. Women were denied the right to vote for years because, among other reasons, they were considered intellectually and emotionally incapable of the responsibilities connected to casting a vote. Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the South. Poll taxes - a specified amount of money to be paid for the right to vote - effectively silenced poor African-Americans prior to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

That's history. Let's do a little theology.

The problem - just as great and maybe even greater - than the historical problem is the theological/moral problem of seeing others as being created in "less than" the image of God. The author - or authors - of the first creation story in Genesis, tell the story so that the culmination of God's creative work was the creation of humankind. Everything else is created - light, sun, moon, stars, oceans, dry land, flying creatures, swimming creatures, "walking around" creatures - and then, capping it all off, in the triumphant moment - God creates us.

Now, I've read my Bible, and I've even gone back to the Hebrew to double check, and nowhere does it say, "So God created white folk in his image." It's not there. I'll stake a week's salary on it.

We think of the creation of humans as the creation of white humans because we were taught by white theologians to think that way. It is the ultimate "white privilege." Archie Bunker, that great theologian of the last century, was arguing with his neighbor, Henry Jefferson, about astronauts and God. The subject of race came up, as it was bound to. After a long argument, an exasperated Archie says to Henry, "I was created in the image of God and you'll notice that I ain't black."

Whatever the "image of God" is - and there are plenty of theologians who argue plenty of viewpoints - we know for certain what the image of God is not. The "image of God" in which all humanity was created has nothing to do with race. The "image of God" has nothing to do with ethnic identity or origin. The "image of God" has nothing to do with anything that divides us.

In the Hindu tradition, there is a wonderful word and practice. The word is "Namaste." It is offered as a greeting or as a leave-taking. "Namaste" means "I recognize the divine in you." You offer a slight bow and then share the word "Namaste."

I am not necessarily encouraging the adoption of the practice, but I am suggesting that we adopt the understanding. In fact, turn to your neighbor, and say, "I see the image of God in you." Go on. . . . At a minimum, the "image of God" is about presence, kindness, acceptance, and recognition.

There is a wonderful story told in Exodus of Moses wanting to catch a glimpse of God. God accommodates Moses, by putting Moses in a "cleft in the rock," and covering Moses with the divine hand, and withdrawing it at the last moment so that Moses can see God's "back" - according to the New Revised Standard Translation. In an earlier translation, Moses saw God's "hinder parts." Moses did not have a face-to-face meeting with God. We shouldn't expect to, either.

But, we can catch a glimpse of God when we look into the face of our neighbor. And our neighbor should be able to catch a glimpse of God when they look into our faces. It will not be a perfect image, because we are not perfect people and we do not perfectly live in God's way. Still, when we begin to see a glimpse of God in each other - the image of God in which we were created way back in the beginning - we will begin to see ancient wounds healed, ancient divisions mended, ancient destructive behaviors ameliorated.

The point of the creation story in Genesis is that we are all created in the same image of God. There is no distinction. It does not matter how much melanin is in our skin. It does not matter from where we come. It does not matter how long our family has been a part of our country.

The great equalizer is that we are all created in the image of God. It is when we choose not to recognize that truth and live in that truth, that we unleash the evil that has marked our history.

But when we embrace that truth - when we see all people, indigenous, immigrant, those brought against their will, those rejected by others - when we see all people as created in the image of God, we will catch a glimpse of God and make a heaven of this earth.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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