

**11 Pentecost
August 20, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In the Eucharistic prayer (from Enriching Our Worship) that we are using this summer are these words:

Blessed are you, gracious God, creator of the universe and giver of life. You formed us in your own image and called us to dwell in your infinite love. You gave the world into our care that we might be your faithful stewards and show forth your bountiful grace.

But we failed to honor your image in one another and in ourselves; we would not see your goodness in the world around us; and so we violated your creation, abused one another, and rejected your love.

This is the basic theme of the Book of Genesis ... The “good” that God has given us and calls us to be faithful stewards of that “good” for our sake and the sake of the world ... and evil that brings brokenness to individual and corporate life. This theme was played out throughout the Book of Genesis. This theme was played out ... and continues to be played out ... in the events of this past week. Yet, in the end, there is hope for the good ... for reconciliation and redemption. That is what this sermon this morning is about.

The Book of Genesis begins with the Creation story in which God says that all that has been made is “good.” But then we have the Garden of Eden when evil enters the picture, followed by the story of Cain and Able ... sibling rivalry and murder. Then comes Noah and the Ark ... God tries to eliminate evil by destroying the world except for Noah and his family, but it doesn’t work. Then there is the Tower of Babel, and Sodom and Gomorrah, and then finally the Abraham and Sarah and their descendants’ epic saga ... which ends with today’s reading.

Each of these stories is about a world that is “good” in which we have been called to be its stewards.

But we failed to honor [God’s] image in one another and in ourselves; we would not see [God’s] goodness in the world around us; and so we violated [God’s] creation, abused one another, and rejected [God’s] love.

But that is not the end of the story ... there is always more. And therein lies our hope.

Remember, these stories are from the beginnings of religion as we know it. Other peoples in other parts of the world, had their stories as well. But they all had the same theme ... a divine

being created the world as good, but humans have corrupted that world. The divine always wants life to be full and good, and in spite of the evil that sabotages that good there is always a hope.

This summer we have been listening to the epic saga of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. This story takes up almost two-thirds of the Book of Genesis. It began when God called Abraham to leave his home and go to a far country where his descendants would be greater than the stars in the sky. But his wife Sarah was barren ... she could not have children ... so Abraham fathered Ishmael by Sarah's handmaid, Hagar. Then, three strangers (maybe angels?) visited and told Abraham that Sarah would have a son in her old age. In due time Isaac was born, and, at least for a little while, he grew up with his half-brother Ishmael. Then evil crept in. Sarah was jealous of Hagar and Ishmael and had them banished to a wilderness. When their meager supply of food and water ran out, and it looked like the end for Ishmael, God intervened. Ishmael was saved, and he became the father of those who would later become the Nation of Islam ... Muslims.

When Isaac grew up ... which, if you remember, included his father almost killing him ... he married Rebekah, and she had twin sons ... Jacob and Esau. Esau ... who was the first-born was his father's favorite. Jacob is Rebekah's favorite. Again, evil crept in. Rebekah and Jacob conspire to steal Esau's birthright from him. When Esau realized what had happened he was furious, and Jacob has to go into exile with his uncle Laban ... Rebekah's brother to keep from being killed by his brother.

In this far land Jacob fell in love with his cousin Rachel ... Laban's daughter ... and he made a deal with Laban to work seven years for her hand in marriage. Then again, evil crept in. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Rachel's sister Leah instead of Rachel. Jacob was angry, but he still wanted the love of his life as his wife. So Jacob made another deal with Laban for Rachel's hand in marriage in exchange for another seven years of labor, and this time Jacob won the prize. In the meantime, Jacob achieved revenge on Laban for his trickery by manipulating the breeding of the sheep in their herds ... Jacob's flocks became huge, while Laban's flocks were decimated.

Over the past few weeks we've heard about Jacob's family ... especially his son Joseph. Jacob had twelve sons ... eleven by Leah, and one, Joseph, by Rachel. Joseph was the youngest ... and was born when Jacob was old. So Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons.

But Joseph was different in other ways. He had dreams ... the kind of dreams that happen while one sleeps ... dreams about the future of the family ... but in very convoluted expressions. Then evil crept in again. Joseph's brothers were jealous of him for his fancy coat and the special attention his dreams gave him, and last week we heard about the brothers selling Joseph to a caravan going to Egypt. The brothers told their father, Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

Good ... and evil. Unity ... and brokenness. Love ... and hate. Why all these stories in the very

first book of our Bible? Some of the stories we've read from this portion of Genesis don't even contain a reference to God ... it is all about dysfunctional family dynamics. Why?

This is last reading from the Book of Genesis that we will hear this year ... at least the last reading in our lectionary before we turn to the Book of Exodus. Yet, this story gives us some clues about the nature of these stories. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt. But his dreams ... and his gift of interpreting dreams ... put him in favor with the Egyptian Pharaoh, and Joseph rose to a position of prominence and authority.

In the meantime, there was a famine back in Canaan where Jacob and his brothers lived. In desperation, Jacob sent his brothers to seek relief from the people in Egypt, and Joseph's brothers end up meeting with Joseph ... although they do not recognize him.

This is the part about good triumphing over evil ... about reconciliation and redemption ... and about hope. At first hiding his identity from his brothers, he finally broke down and told them who he was ... their brother ... the one that they had sold into slavery. However, instead of revenge, Joseph forgave his brothers. Joseph saw it as part of God's plan for their future. In addition, he brought his family down to Egypt to escape the famine in their homeland. There is reconciliation. There is redemption. And there is hope for the future.

And, back to the story of the twins ... Jacob and Esau, Well, after all those years of living in a far country with his uncle Laban, Jacob decided it was time to return home to face the consequences of his brother Esau's rightful anger. But when Esau saw Jacob on the horizon he ran to greet him ... and they embraced ... and Jacob returned the birthright he had stolen from his older twin. Reconciliation ... redemption ... and hope.

Throughout the Book of Genesis we hear stories of the bounty of God's creation being subverted by evil, but then there is reconciliation, redemption and hope. Is it any different today?

I do not want to minimize the evil that is being perpetrated by those who espouse hate and violence ... Neo-Nazis ... KKK ... White Nationalists ... domestic and foreign terrorists. In the promises we make in our Baptismal Covenant we commit to

"striv[ing] for justice and peace among all people, and [to] respect the dignity of every human being."

Hatred and violence in all its forms has no justification or defense in our world today ... or in the past.

But we failed to honor God's image in one another and in ourselves; we would not see God's goodness in the world around us; and so we violated God's creation, abused one another, and rejected God's love.

We must stand against all forms of hatred ... explicit and implicit. To be silent is to become complicit with those who espouse hatred. We must stand for non-violence in the face of violence. To do otherwise is to participate in the very hatred the voices of evil are perpetrating.

But we must also have hope. Hope for a time when good shall overcome evil. Hope for a time when we will be reconciled to those with whom we have been alienated. Hope for a time when there will be redemption for this nation and for the world.

The events in Charlottesville and in Barcelona this past week have clearly focused what is evil in this world today ... that which is trying to tear apart wholeness. And there will be other events like Charlottesville and Barcelona ... we can count on it. However, we ... you and I ... are the forces of hope for the future. We are the forces for reconciliation and redemption. And we are grounded in that hope by stories from the beginning of our faith. It is that spiritual strength that compels us to continual works towards a better world for all of God's creation into which

God gave the world into our care that we might be God's faithful stewards and show forth God's bountiful grace.

Amen.