

## **GOD IS GOOD**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 24, 2016  
Based on Psalm 100, I John 4:7-13***

The sermon this morning is the third in a sermon series entitled, “Ten Truths that Change Life.” I mentioned in the opening sermon how the series was inspired by the popular physics course at Kent State University, “Seven Ideas that Shook the Universe,” which my daughter Rachel took last semester. That course looks at breakthrough scientific ideas which have transformed how people think about the universe; and it occurred to me that we can certainly also identify breakthrough spiritual, theological ideas which have transformed how people think about and approach life. In the past two weeks, we have looked at two key Biblical ideas: about our identity—that we are created by God in the image of God—and about our fundamental human problem—that we have alienated ourselves from God, in a condition that the Bible calls sin. This morning we turn our attention from questions about our human nature to consider the nature of God. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Many revolutionary ideas in science have now become so broadly accepted that we tend to forget how revolutionary those ideas were. When Copernicus and Galileo first began suggesting that the sun is the center of the solar system, and that the earth orbits around it, and when ideas expanded out that there are many solar systems and many galaxies, these were originally extraordinary notions. Now we accept these ideas in a matter of fact way, so that we can have movies like Star Wars in which space ships are zipping from one solar system to another, and it all seems perfectly natural to everyone.

A similar pattern can be seen in the realm of theological ideas. There are a number of Biblical ideas that were revolutionary in human history, but which now are so broadly accepted by people that the ideas appear almost self-evident. This is the case with the statement, God is good. Many people today would say, “Well of course God is good.” But in human history, this is not how many people imagined God, and in fact it is not how some people imagine God today.

In the first sermon in this series, when we talked about the Biblical teaching that we are created in the image of God, we noted that human beings seem to have a built-in capacity to be aware of God, so much so that scientists have remarked that human beings appear to be hard-wired for God. This natural awareness of God is expressed historically in the fact that virtually all ancient cultures were religious. The awareness of the reality of God has continued through the centuries. Today in America, a large segment of the population is not active in church, and yet the great majority of those people would still say that they are “spiritual.” Human beings have had an abiding sense that there is a spiritual reality that surrounds around us, there is a higher power beyond us.

But people have not been so clear when it comes to conceiving what that higher power is like. Most ancient people imagined that the higher power is actually a collection of powers—that there are numerous gods—and those gods were generally not so good. In the ancient near east, in virtually all cultures from the Babylonians to the Greeks, the gods were typically envisioned as capricious, self-centered, squabbling, and at times

downright nasty. Such divine nastiness can be seen in ancient religions all around the world—from the grim goddess Kali in ancient India to the gods of Mesoamerica who demanded human sacrifice. Religion in these contexts became a set of rituals designed to appease the gods and curry their favor, even if they were not well disposed toward human beings to begin with. Ancient religions generally would not have said that the gods are bad, but rather that the gods *don't care*—the higher powers of the universe blast along without particular concern for human beings.

You may note that this world view, in its basic contours, is essentially the world view represented by atheism today. Just take out the mythological language about pantheons of squabbling gods, and you've got the modern idea that the universe is ruled by a set of cosmic powers that collide together with no moral framework and no regard for human beings.

In this context the Bible delivers a revolutionary message. The Bible declares first of all that the power that governs the universe is unified, that there is one God [*The Lord is one. Deut. 6:4*], who reigns over all and holds all things together. This idea actually provided the critical philosophical underpinning for the beginnings of modern science. The idea that the universe is not just a chaotic clashing of capricious powers but that there is one God, providing shape and order to all, gave confidence to early scientists that we should be able to find reasonable laws that describe an orderly cosmos.

But the Bible goes further to say that the one God is good. The phrase that we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning—the Lord is good—is one of the most oft repeated refrains in the Bible. But how do we know that God is good? The Bible declares that the way that we know God is not through our own imagining—people can imagine all sorts of things about God and have done so throughout history—but rather we can know what God is like because God *reveals* His nature to us. God shows us what He is like throughout the Biblical story; and that self-revelation of God comes to its culmination in Jesus Christ. If we want to know what God is truly like, God gives us the perfectly clear picture in Jesus. In Jesus we see that God is good, God is caring and compassionate, indeed, as our passage said in I John, God is love. [I John 4:8]

This truth is transformational if we take it to heart. It means that we are not just at the whim of uncaring cosmic forces, but there is an ultimate power of goodness that reigns over us. So we can look to God for help and blessing, we can expect that there is some meaning and purpose to life, and we can hope for a positive future. These are all themes that we will develop further as this sermon series continues.

Moreover, the proclamation that God is good, if we take it to heart, will have an enormous impact on how we live in the world; for if God is good, then surely we are to live in goodness. In the early years of Christianity, the most distinctive feature of Christians within the paganism of the Roman Empire was how Christians showed compassion and gave assistance to people in need. Christians had a welfare program for widows that was without parallel in the ancient world; and they made a particular impression in the second and third centuries when major plagues swept through the empire. As thousands in the cities fell from the plagues, the general response of the population was to get out of town. The sick and dying were left behind. The Christians stayed in the cities, and even went into the cities, in order to provide care for the sick and dying. Over time, the general population was so impressed by the charity of

Christians that many people were inspired to come to Christian faith. The early church leader Tertullian said that as pagans looked at Christians, their common response was to say, "See how they love one another." [*Tertullian, late 2<sup>nd</sup>-early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, on what people in the Roman Empire observed about Christians*] One would hope that that is what people would say when they look at Christians today!

In our better moments, today's Christians do carry forward the themes of those early centuries. The church today has extensive systems to provide care for the needy, and our response to crisis is compassion. During the recent Ebola epidemic in west Africa, a great many workers on the front lines were missionaries and others motivated by their faith. Once again, Christians were running toward the plague. In the picture you see on the screen, the woman on the left, Beatrice Gbanga, is our missionary in Sierra Leone, where she coordinates health care in our United Methodist hospitals and clinics there. The woman on the right, Mbalu Fonnio, was head nurse in an ebola ward; she died from ebola during the epidemic. Why would people risk their lives to help others? Because God is good, because Jesus is love.

Our understanding of God profoundly shapes how we will live. If we think that the powers that govern the universe are uncaring, as many ancient pagans thought, then we will be motivated to just save our own skin. If we think that God is bloodthirsty, demanding human sacrifice, then we will act as the ancient Aztecs did, cutting out human hearts on high altars. If we think that God is vengeful and hates unbelievers, then we will become modern terrorists, who believe that God blesses their hate and wants them to exterminate those unbelievers. You will notice that when radical Islamists commit brutal acts, they typically shout, "God is great." It would be rather impossible for terrorists to shout, "God is good," while slaughtering innocent people. They believe in God's power but not in God's goodness.

Our understanding of God's nature is critical, because it will shape our understanding of how we are to live. This is why the Bible is so clear that God is good. God watches over us and cares for us, as the Psalmist said, as a shepherd cares for the sheep of the pasture [*We are God's people, the sheep of His pasture. Psalm 100:3*], and we then also are to care for others. Indeed our love for others will be the sign that we truly know God. As I John put it, "Anyone who does not love does not know God. Those who love are born of God and know God." [I John 4:7-8] The truth that God is good is transformational for human living.

But then a further question arises, "If God is good, then why is there so much evil in the world?" This was not a question for most of the ancient world. If you asked an ancient Babylonian or Greek why there are bad things in the world, the answer would be, "Because the gods are up to no good." But the question does arise when we affirm that God is good. Indeed this is one of the main points at which atheists will object to Christian faith, saying, "How can there be a good God when there are so many bad things in the world?"

What atheists often fail to realize is that if they deny God, they must answer the opposite question: "If there is no God, why do we even have an idea of good and evil?" If we are just material beings that arose out of physical processes, then we should not even think in terms of good and evil, and we certainly should not have any sort of overarching high ideal of "the good." We should just be concerned about our own

survival; and the moral ethic that is at the heart of Christianity—that one should be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of a stranger—should appear to us as completely nonsensical. Yet the morality of Jesus resonates within people—when we look at Jesus with open hearts we have a deep sense that this is how we should live. The kind of moral goodness that is exemplified in Jesus only makes sense when we acknowledge what we saw in the first sermon in this series—that we are created by God in the image of God; and because God is good, we have a deep, built-in idea of the good. Our moral conscience is a reflection of the goodness of God.

But if God is good, then how do we account for the evil that makes headlines every day? The Bible accounts for this in the story of Adam and Eve that we considered last week. The story depicts how God creates human beings and blesses them with all that they need. As God places humans within a wonderful world, God gives to human beings something quite remarkable—God gives people freedom to choose how to live, even whether or not to follow God. This aspect of the story is extraordinary, especially within the context of the ancient world, where rulers did not grant freedom to their subjects, especially the freedom to disobey the ruler. The ancient idea of kingship was that a good society would be one in which people were compelled to follow the king. Sometimes today people think that God should compel everyone to follow God's will. But the story of Adam and Eve contains a deep insight—that a truly good world will be one in which people are free to choose how they will live, even if this carries the risk that people will choose poorly, as of course Adam and Eve do. God's goodness allows the possibility that we will do wrong, even terrible wrong.

God's goodness will be seen not in God forcing people to do good, preventing evil by controlling us. God's goodness will be seen in God acting to redeem us out of wrongdoing when we fall, to rescue us out of evil. This is what God does in Jesus Christ. Christ offers himself for us on the cross, so that we can be forgiven and lifted up out of sin and evil, and Christ invites us to receive that salvation in faith. So we remain free, and through the transforming power of Christ we can be made authentically good.

We will continue to live, of course, in a world full of challenge. God's goodness also allows us to meet obstacles and troubles, because it is in meeting real challenges that we can truly grow in spirit. But God is with us to help us. God gives us the Holy Spirit, and if we are receptive to the working of God's Spirit, we can be empowered to know and show forth God's goodness in our daily lives.

God is good. This truth is at the heart of the Biblical Word. It is transformational, when we open ourselves to how God's goodness will flow in and through us.