

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "The Parade of Purpose before a Purposeless World"

Text: Genesis 1:26-28; 12:4-9; Hebrews 11:8-10

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- I suspect our God likes a good **parade**. He is the one who told the Israelites to form a line and parade around the city of Jericho once a day for six days then seven times around on the seventh day with trumpets blaring.
- God is also the one who told Abram to **parade** his family around the land of the Canaanites taking them to a famous tree at *Shechem* and then back through that valley between *Bethel* and *Ai*.
- I'm not exactly sure what a Canaanite person who observed this **parade** looked like or talked like in Abram's day. BUT, neither are you—so this impression will have to do.
- ***"Blimey, mate! What's that crazy old guy from Ur of the Chaldees doing PARADING around our Canaanite land and piling up all those piles of rocks??!"***
- Let's go back to the beginning to see if we can find an answer to their question that still matters to us today.
- *First*, God made THE **place** that was absolutely perfect for His perfect Creation plan to share his life-giving Glory with his living creatures. And, God looked at the place—the setting he had made—and pronounced it was all **"good!"**
- Then God said: ***"Let us make man in our 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 him; male and female he created them.***
- ***"God blessed them*** (that is to say that he **empowered** them for fulfilling this created purpose to be the **reproducers** of his image—to be the **seed** bearers that would reproduce and fill the earth with a harvest of his glory. Humans would represent his righteous, life-

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giving character in all the earth) ***and (God) said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.'***"

- What a ***purpose!*** What a reason for ***being alive!*** What a God-given ***significance*** is possessed by every human being—a significance given, by God himself, created in us as his perfect plan! This created significance from God is the truth whether or not humans today can see it, feel it, be aware of it and understand it. Whether or not they accept it as their true purpose for existing!
- This divine *reason to be alive* is true whether or not humans prove out its reality by how they live their lives either to fulfill it or to ignore it.
- This human purpose is the truth even if nearly everyone else—nearly every other human—in this world thinks it is a *useless fairytale* when it becomes inscripturated in the creation description of Genesis chapter 1.
- The water in which humans swim—the *cultural imagination* that humans carry, in a natural way thinking this is "just how things are," has been corrupted and remains polluted by their grasp at significance without God.
- This claim of human autonomy—the claim that humans can make a life of **purpose** and value for themselves—is inescapable while we are living in this world. It's mistaken claims cling to all humans as unrelentingly as the stinking spray of a skunk clings to a dog's snout and can barely even be hidden by harsh soaping and sweet perfuming. The hint of the odor of this error concerning our reality is still there even when it is covered up.
- Let's be honest with one another here. The few of us humans ever stop to consider the stink. Most humans just get used to it as being the "normal."

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- Few humans—even few of us—ever pause long to think deeply about our most basic principles that drive our everyday behaviors. Most humans just live a life, left unexamined, assuming what happens is—well...just how life is and just what life is supposed to be about.
- But pause with me, for a moment, to think of just one example—just one—a major one in our day, but still just one—of the polluting ideas that dirties our cultural waters and leaves its stink on all of us to some degree when we are not always diligent to be aware of the smell.
- Please keep in mind this is just a single example. It is not the root of the whole problem or the only form of “thinking-pollutant” we humans have gotten so used to smelling we sometimes forget it stinks.
- Whether or not we conclude that Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection and the whole range of evolutionary theory has some scientific validity, we cannot deny that it has been influential in our culture’s thinking.
- However, as I just said, we rarely think deeply enough about our foundational, driving truths by which we live, to recognize how, for example, Darwin’s ideas polluted the water in which we swim.
- His ideas eventually led many “scientists” steeped already in the stink of autonomy from God to conclude and teach that we live in a world that has no need of a designer—no need of a Creator.
- Our world is autonomous when it comes to creating what is here and the life that fills it.
- Supported by a another source of autonomous stink—the stink of worshipping *materialism*, *rationalism* and (for the sake of ease will call it) *scientism*—this no-need-for-a Creator—idea got into the

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water, stunk it up, and then became accepted by many, many people as the norm. If the world is self-created and life is self-created—then who I am is also self-created. I am as autonomous as the world that evolved on its own.

- Most people, who accept it as the norm, aren't even aware that they have been contaminated by the stink. It's just how the materialist world—the real world to them—is supposed to smell.
- They have not thought deeply about what such an idea of self-creation—of autonomy—then says about the purpose and significance of human beings as creatures in this world. They have not paused very long to feel the depressing fact that a world that smells like this—a no-Creator necessary world—cannot provide any real purpose for their human existence.
- This, just one example of a "thinking-pollutant," permeates the waters of our western culture and we Christians have not totally escaped the stink. We wouldn't say it was truth, aloud, but we still live life under its influence.
- This is true even in Jesus' church. Very often, we are not even aware the stink is on us—it seems it is just how reality smells. And, nobody likes the suggestion that they or their church might stink a bit.
- Without explicitly drawing all of the connections for you right now, ultimately a world like this leads to *nihilism* (what's the point of life at all?!), apathy (why bother to think about it—to care?!), or in a different direction. This one turns toward autonomy from God, with gusto, turning into **ambitious** autonomy.
- This is the force of autonomy that knowingly claims—I **can** make my life without God! I **must** make my life significant without God because, it seems, after all there is no real God-given purpose to life that makes my life feel significant.

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- All of that *Creation* and *imago dei* business in *Genesis* is probably just a story—a *theological fairytale* to make religion work. After all, it has even been disproven by the reigning king of authority His Royal Highness King Rationalistic, Materialistic, Scientism.
- I know most of us would object to an accusation that we think this way. I certainly have as I have encountered God's word in *Genesis*.
- However, I am suggesting the stink gets on us more than we know in ways we are hardly even aware of because, day-to-day, we just don't think very deeply about why we believe what we believe concerning the seemingly trivial circumstances of that day and then why we do what we do, so easily and so naturally, in response.
- So, bit by bit, we can become more and more autonomous from God when we don't even want to be autonomous from God—when we aren't even highly aware that is what we are doing.
- Let me give you just a hint at one way this shows up even in us. We make many choices and then, if necessary, we validate them with our preferences and feelings because those have become our everyday, highest authority. Maybe, if the question even arises we will validate our choices by saying they are from God. We do this because we are religious people. Other non-religious people validate by a claims to things like experts, the science, the utility and so on.
- To put it in another way, we slowly but surely, bit by bit, can come to ***believe we are the potter and not the clay***. Like the culture around us—the water in which we swim—the stink of no God-created purpose for humans—at least not in any day-to-day sense of that purpose impacting our lives—it can begin to cling to us. But, it smells normal because most humans and human institutions of culture such as government, education, scientism, and others say it is normal.

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- Again, sometimes even churches live as if it is normal even if we would never agree with the statement that "we are autonomous" when we thought about it.
- Our lives and our church are pretty much up to us to shape as we choose. Any purpose we understand in our head—any significance we feel in our gut—will need to be built by us—autonomously.
- We live as if we are the potter and this world and this life is our clay to make into what we want it to be. It exists for our fulfillment and self-made significance even if we still feel we must baptize those motivations by saying they are revelations directly from God to us.
- As the potters, we are then the real authority over the choices that determine shape and give purpose to the clay.
- As I have said, in our day—our individualized culture—for reasons we don't have time to go into in detail right now, that authority often goes no deeper than our ***individualized psychological desires and preferences***—what we like in our heads—what we want in our heads.
- There is no need to submit those desires to any other authoritative source of design-information—Oh say, for instance God's Word. Instead, we will interpret God's Word based on our design because, again, we are the potter. Scripture then becomes simply part of the clay that exists in our personal world's "water" to help us find ways to make our design into what we have the authority to make it be.
- As I have also said so many times and will continue to say here, Lord willing, this is the Serpent's devious twist from the beginning of devious twists offered to humans. It stinks but we get so used to the smell we find it almost comfortingly normal.

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- And what in the world does this have to do with *Genesis* 12:4-9 and a wandering Abram? Well, please let me tell you. I'll read the text first and then make this connection. **READ Genesis 12:4-9**
- In the previous verses, the LORD called on Abram to "**zero-base**" his life. Zero basing was originally an accounting idea that was anathema to most bureaucrats and politicians. It meant taking a budget line item back to zero and then having to justify it being in the budget at all rather than beginning with a talk on increasing.
- This going back to nothing, came to be applied to planning and programming that started with a "clean sheet" and called upon the facts to justify every item in the plan from that starting, 0-baseline.
- When the LORD called Abram to **zero-base** he asked him to leave behind the country, people, household and land he had known his entire life—to leave behind what he was used to as being the norm of life.
- He asked Abram to "*clean-sheet*" his life from what he was used to as the norm and, thus, *reset* his life with a new beginning. Of course, Abram didn't leave everything he had known in all his human existence. He was still going to eat food, herd camels, wear the clothes of a man of his time and place and other such things.
- However, this call was enough of a clean-sheet, zero-basing that Abram and his family would sense a big difference in everyday life that was— just what they expected each day to be about.
- In terms of what I have already talked about, the smell of their life would change. The "smell" they had become used to as humans living in Ur of the Chaldees would be different and they would become aware of that in a stark way.

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- Mixing all the metaphors—that is what **resets** do. They awaken people to what they have stopped sensing even if it stunk and they had become used to it.
- The LORD promises he will bless, that is he will empower, Abram to build up a new life with unimaginable purpose that has a lasting significance if Abram will let go of these important line items in the budget of his life thus far.
- Abram made the choice. He trusted the promises of the LORD. He had enough faith in those promises with their guarantor to act upon them—he left. Abram, zero-based his life with the promise that God would rebuild it with great purpose.
- To put it one way, in keeping with the word we have been using in *Genesis*, Abram chose faith in the LORD over autonomy. He chose God as the potter and he and his family as the clay.
- Then God scheduled a **parade**. Marching through Canaan in the line behind their gray-haired, grizzled 75 year-old "drum major" Abram, were his wife Sarai the beautiful majorette and Lot his nephew who would one day prove you can take the boy out of Ur but you can take all the UR out of the boy.
- Then, I suppose on beasts of burden were all of the possessions the family needed. These were like the floats, I grew up watching, in the big Thanksgiving Day Parade put on by JL Hudsons department store in Detroit.
- Then there were all the other paraders that were part of Abram's household. They were like the unicycle riders and the clown acts—maybe the jugglers.
- As with any parade today, the parade route through Canaan was mapped with a purpose. Eventually, Shechem and Bethel with Ai, among the designated spots would become very special places—

really, HOLY places—for the family that sprang from Abram as God promised it would. Even before that, they would have meaning repeated by Abram's own grandson, Jacob.

- Entering, in the North of the land of Canaan, after their 500 mile trip from Haran—moving south to Shechem—then further to Beth and Ai and on to the region furthest south, Negev Desert, Abram **paraded** through the whole of the land.
- While **parading**, Moses tells us of two spectators for this demonstration. The first was the Lord himself who showed up after the parade had gone quite a distance into the land. The Lord showed up and repeated one of his implied promises with more specificity this time.
- "Leave and go to THE land I will show you," was all Abram originally got back in 12:1 from Google Maps or Siri's directions. Now Abram is assured he is not only in the right place but that this will be **The land** where God's promises will begin to be fulfilled for Abram's recently zero-based life.
- The Lord never makes even little mistakes in how he speaks things. "**To your offspring I will give this land.**" That would not happen immediately. It would not happen, in fact, for several generations. It would happen in the time of the generation for whom Moses is recording this part of God's Word. To that generation the implicit question would be, "Does God keep his promises?" The answer would be, "Trust that he does and let him show you right now!"
- Now, let's think again about the second set of spectators Moses makes sure in the second half of verse 6 that we know were also there watching this parade—the Canaanites. They already lived in this land and they believed it to be their land—belonging to them.

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- So back to the Canaanite parade watcher. ***"What is this crazy guy doing walking through OUR land and leaving behind piles of rocks? He doesn't look like any other trespasser intent on putting down roots. He has some people and some resources but he is not laying any foundations for building his own permanent house—for establishing his own city to name after himself. He is certainly not trying to build his own tower to show us how capable and significant he is. Let's look at the pile of rocks he left behind. Maybe there is a clue there."***
- Too bad the Canaanite parade watcher didn't have the NT as we have. He could have read Hebrews 11:8-10 just as we have done more than once while looking at this section of *Genesis*.
- Abram, a man with a zero-based life now trusting God for purpose and significance based on God's promises alone, was indeed a strange man for his time and place. This is true of any man like Abram today with the same values and driving principles to his life.
- Abraham was not living for what the Canaanites lived for—his purpose was different.
- The author of Hebrews makes that so clear: ***<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.***
- So after Abram and his parade passed by, the Canaanite observers checked out the piles of stone. They appeared to be some sort of sacrificial altar—something used to appease the gods.

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- But these altars weren't particularly elaborate—certainly not as elaborate as their own gods demanded to keep them appeased.
- This Abram seems to worship different gods in a different way than the way of us Canaanites, they concluded. And then they went on about their routine business of life that day not thinking very deeply about what they had just witnessed.
- And, the stink of their autonomous living—autonomy with respect to Abram's Creator God that is—just smelled like normal—so normal they really didn't even notice it.
- Abram is a new beginning in the line of the seed of God's redemptive promise.
- Abram, especially in this parade through Canaan is the picture of restored human purpose—a return to being the imago dei humans were created to be.
- That restoration wasn't about being more religious—not about building a better stone altar. That restoration was about zero-basing the man made purposes for being alive and focusing on one purpose alone. That focus was parading a life that made lifting up the NAME of the Creator God the true foundation for his values and his actions that came out of those values.
- For at least a moment, in this episode, the stink of ambitious autonomy was gone from God's human.
- God thought this was something the Canaanites who would not lift up His name nor call on his name ought to see so he called for a parade in front of them.
- Why am I in this world? Why are you? Why are we in this church together? How does that impact the way we live?

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- Sometimes we humans can get used to the smell of autonomy. The answer is not to work harder at defining our own purpose in some way that seems godly.
- The answer is to zero-base the governing values of our lives in the manner God would have us do it and then to live life as if it were a parade of altar-building and calling upon the Lord.
- That's the purpose for which we humans were all created—every last one of us!