

March 4, 2007
Genesis 1:1-18

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
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<15:1> After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."
 <2> But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"
 <3> And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."
 <4> But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir."
 <5> He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."
 <6> And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.
 <7> Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess."
 <8> But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"
 <9> He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."
 <10> He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.
 <11> And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.
 <12> As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.
 <13> Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years;
 <14> but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.
 <15> As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.
 <16> And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."
 <17> When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.
 <18> On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

Last month's series of discussions during Adult Education on Hot Topics reinforced what many of us already know about the folks in this church—we are not all of one mind when it comes to contemporary political issues. One issue we didn't discuss, but about which I have very strong opinions, is gun control and the historical meaning of the Second Amendment. And though I'm sure there are plenty of you who disagree with my personal position on gun control, I think we could agree that there is one kind of gun everyone should have.

This is our caulk gun and nobody better ever try and take it away from me. When I get this thing in my hands, I become the Queen of Caulking. Got a leak around the edge of a sink? Never fear, the Queen of Caulking is here! Got a gap between the wall and a piece of trim? Never fear, the Queen of Caulking is here! Got a draft coming in around the sides of a window? Never fear, the Queen of Caulking is here!

Caulking holes, leaks, and gaps is satisfying. It gives me the feeling that I've fixed something. I've made something better.

As a minister, some people have the expectation that I'm going to be able to take a caulk gun to their souls. I recently discovered an old friend from college living in the area. We got together for lunch one day a few weeks ago. After catching up for a bit, she said, pointing to her abdomen, "There's just this hole, right here, and I can't get it full." She had tried to fill it with work, food, drugs, sex, alcohol, and shopping, but alas, the hole was still there. She seemed to think that I was going to be able to say or do something to fill that hole and make her feel whole.

Maybe I would have tried to say something like that to make it all better earlier in my ministry. But the longer I serve as a minister the more complex the world becomes. And so I couldn't, in good conscience, give my old friend what she wanted—a quick fix to her spiritual dilemma--because there are no quick fixes to spiritual dilemmas, questions, and challenges.

Now, many in modern religious institutions disagree with me. They have come up with crack pot theologies that lead one to believe that if only you do X, Y, and Z (one of which usually involves sending a big check to said religious organization) you will be happy, all the voids in your life will be filled, and you will be blessed. Of particular popularity over the last decade or so is, what they call, The Gospel of Prosperity. Adherents to this interpretation of the Bible believe that God helps those who help themselves. (Which as you will recall from an earlier sermon, is NOT Biblical.) These folks get on the radio and television programs telling folks that God makes folks that God likes rich. They say that wealth is a sign of blessing. If this is their gospel, then they surely are not adherents to the real Gospel the one in which Jesus, over and over again, shows preference for the poor, the sick—those who would be considered anything but prosperous. Remember his words from a few weeks back—blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the sick.

My issue with the Gospel of Prosperity and other theologies like it isn't just that they aren't Biblical, but also that distorted theologies such as these set people up for a faith crisis. Time and again in my ministry I have heard people say—"Well God obviously doesn't like me because look at all of this bad stuff that's happening in my life." I remember ministering to a woman who had been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. She had read account after account from women who had cancer similar to hers and those women prayed for a miracle and by their next doctor's appointment, they had, without any other explanation, been cured. Now I don't doubt that miracles such as these happen, but to say it's because the person prayed enough or believed enough or was somehow special enough to God—that I don't believe. And what really ticks me off is when miraculous healings are attributed to an individual's faith in God instead of actually to God. To do so makes those who aren't miraculously healed feel like somehow they're not doing something right or they don't have enough faith. These kind of crack pot theologies further victimize the victims of illness, grief, and poverty. After all, according to the Gospel of Prosperity if you're ill, grieving, or poor, it's obviously your fault and so those of us who aren't ill, grieving, or poor don't have to take any responsibility for those who are. Again—a statement that is absolutely antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Much modern theological drivel has led us to think of God as light, and love, and life. God is all of those things—indeed I say those exact words nearly every Sunday. But God is not just light, and love, and life. God is so much more. And until we realize that, we will be limiting God, misunderstanding God, and feeling an absence of God even though such a reality is impossible. In our effort to contain God, understand God, and label God we have watered God down, made God into our image, and streamlined God to such a degree that we often don't even recognize God when God is in our midst because our narrow definition of God does not encompass all of the complexities of life.

I don't know when religion became an antidote, a cure all, something like caulk that can just be squeezed into an empty space to make it full. But it's a crying shame that that is how it's come to be understood. The Bible is rich in its complex descriptions of how people experience the presence and reality of God. In this morning's passage from the book of Genesis, Abraham experiences God in a place of darkness and despair, indeed it is described as a deep and terrifying darkness—hardly a place of prosperity and well being. And yet it is from his time in that dark place that Abraham emerges with a more profound understanding of God and what it is that God wishes him to do with his life. Now let's be very clear, Abraham does not come out of that dark place full of answers to his questions about God, but rather he comes out of that place realizing that God is not only goodness, light, and life but that somehow, God also inhabits the darkness, despair, and desperateness of life.

A few years ago I read the novel *The Monk Downstairs*. On the surface it's a nice little love story about a former monk who falls for his land lady. But there is a whole other aspect to the story. Interwoven between the narrative of the relationship of the leading couple are these letters written back and forth between the former monk, Michael Christopher, and Brother James, a young man who joined the religious order soon before Michael Christopher left it. Brother James has all of the aspiration and optimism that one would expect in a novice theologian. However, the former monk, Michael Christopher had experienced a spiritual breakdown of such proportions that he could never go back to the naïve believer he had once been. In a series of letters, the young monk attempts to talk the former monk back into a "happy-go-lucky, everything will be okay if you just believe" faith. Michael Christopher responds to one of Brother James's letters with the following.

Dear Brother James,

Thank you for your letter, which I took as an attempt to cheer me up. But I am beyond being cheered by reassurances that I am "a good person at heart" and that "God will provide." That kind of stuff just makes me suspect you aren't really paying attention . . . God is not a comfort, to be offered like Kleenex . . .

Have you forgotten, cultivating your pleasantness? Or have you really never known that terrible enormity? You talk of faith as if we were not desperate men; you prescribe it like an antacid. But real faith is a failure and a defeat, vomiting blood; real faith is a morphine drip; it is plastic bags whirled by the wind in an empty parking lot, and a cigarette butt in dirty sand. It is possums squashed by trucks, and the slaughter on the evening news.

You consider me a project, clearly-community outreach or something, a target for your well-meaning nonsense about God. You walk around passing out hope like theological Monopoly money. But your colorful bills are no good here, Brother James. I am traveling in the desert, as you are; I'm off the game board. If we go on together, let's go on like men who are lost, crying for love as men cry for water. Let's not pretend we're doing anything else.

*Yours in Christ,
Michael Christopher*

(The Monk Downstairs by Jim Farrington, pg. 165-166.)

In my ministry, and in my life, I have met many Michael Christopher's--folks who are traveling in the desert, lost and crying, in need of true companionship. And it's not just the folks at the food pantry or in the hospital. It is you, it is me—it is all of us. Sure, we may come here because we like the other folks or because we're intellectually curious or because we enjoy singing in the choir. But that's not the only reason we come because we can find nice folks, intellectual stimulation, and musical opportunities elsewhere. No, there's something deeper—something more to this place. Somewhere, in our hearts, we are like the former monk, we know that faith is not always shiny and bright. Because, like Abraham, we have lived or are living in dark shadowy places that scare us.

We know the darkness of chronic illness, failing memories, broken marriages, shrinking bank accounts, ravaging addictions, and consuming grief. And if we bought all of the lines we're fed about God blessing those who deserve it, we'd begin to think that because we suffer God must be withholding blessing. And in thinking that, we would begin to perceive an absence of God. And what a tragic outcome that would be. No, I have to agree with our fictional former monk—somehow, God is in the darkness, the tragedy, and in our despair. And perhaps, it could be said, that these places of darkness are the places in which we most experience God and become acquainted with the divine because when we're there, all of the trappings of life are stripped away and we're left with very little, except God.

No, faith's not an antidote and God can't be squished into a caulk gun to be used to fill the holes in our lives. But we would be mistaken to think that the holes in our lives aren't already inhabited by God. Yes, God is the life, the light, and the love—but God is also the dying, the darkness, and the despair. This kind of theology doesn't sell on infomercials and radio broadcasts, and yet, having a better appreciation for the complexities and breadth of God better prepares us for living through the complexities and breadth of the experiences of this life. Thanks be to God who is both life and death, light and darkness, love and fear who, though we may find ourselves in a deep and terrifying darkness, never abandons us.