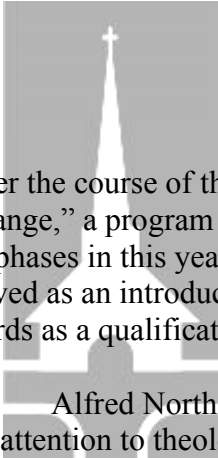


The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



The Growth Of God

Psalm 137.1-4; John 3.8

Russ Dean, September 11, 2005

Over the course of this year we will study as a congregation “The Church and Social Change,” a program developed out of conversations with our deacons. The first of three emphases in this year of study is, “Changing Structures of Authority.” This sermon served as an introduction to that emphasis, and prior to the sermon, I shared the following words as a qualification of the sermon title and the idea that God “grows.”

Alfred North Whitehead spent much of his life as a mathematician before turning his attention to theology. The language of the theology he knew was not satisfactory to Whitehead’s view of the world, so he set about to offer a new language by which his mathematical, scientific, and technical world could understand God. Whitehead began to conceive of God “not just as an external being, but as a divine process coming into being within the life of this world.”¹

For Whitehead and the followers of his “Process Theology,” contrary to popular understanding, God changed – constantly. God was not the unchangeable power above the world, but the heart of the process of unfolding and becoming that is our world. I appreciate what I know of Process Theology, but when I entitled my sermon “The Growth of God” I did not have process theology in mind, but something much more practical. I believe the language we use to speak of God creates an image for God, and that image for all intents and purposes becomes God. Does God “grow,” or change? I like to speculate with the Process Theologians (though any answer to that question is but speculation), but I am convinced in a much more practical way the answer is very much “yes” – God “grows” (in the world) through our understandings and actions and language.

It could only be described as indescribable. Almost overnight, all was lost. The storm had gathered on the horizon, visible for days, but in a way it had been there, brewing for years. Prophets had spewed tales of impending disaster, but their gloom fell on deaf ears. The force of inertia, which almost always marries itself to a justice of procrastination (you know, “what’s not right, we probably can’t change anyway, but, we’ll try to do better... tomorrow”), the killing drag of inertia is almost always

¹ John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p.63.

insurmountable. The rich are always too comfortable and too self-absorbed to change; the poor are already too downtrodden to get up. So rich and poor, who disbelieved for too long, braced, too late, for the onslaught.

Homes fell under the great wrath. Families were lost, divided by death and separation. The city wreaked of disaster. Destruction and disgrace filled the air for weeks. And when the fury subsided, an entire people awoke with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Across a sea of refugees, faces showed the stain of sweat and tears, minds swaggered in empty comprehension, hearts fell flat for want of help and hope, and quietly, the questions surfaced: Where is God? Who is God? What is God? Is God?

The story may sound familiar – as in, the only news you’ve heard for weeks² – but the year was 586 BCE, and the storm was named Nebuchadnezzar. His Babylonian army blew into Jerusalem with Category V ferocity, and when the calm finally returned, the people knew their city and their lives – and their God – would never be the same again – *for the spirit blows where it chooses*.

The hurricane I have described is known to historians as The Babylonian Exile. You cannot understand your Bible without knowing of the two great exiles of the Israelites: the first, occurring in Egypt; the second, lasting for two generations under the scourge of a Babylonian King. You cannot fully understand the faith Jesus practiced, nor the faith that has become our own, without being aware of these formative moments in Jewish history. And, even if you have no interest in biblical history, I believe you cannot understand the winds that are brewing on the horizon of our world unless you understand the forces that were at work in this ancient tempest. It was a political and cultural and

² Hurricane Katrina came ashore in New Orleans, LA two weeks ago.

religious crucible, which reached its melting point on the banks of that foreign river. It was a crucible in which God Grew Up.

You need not be an historian to understand “The Exile.” You need only remember this (and make whatever contemporary comparison seems apt³): at the moment of crisis, the nation of Israel was enjoying nearly unprecedented success. Politically, militarily, economically, and especially religiously, the nation seemed to be flourishing. Despite the growing cry of a few prophets, the likes of Amos and Hosea and Isaiah, despite their cry that the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer, despite their efforts to show that there was a connection between the two, despite their denouncement of the laws of the land as ungodly for so favoring the “haves” over the “have-nots,” despite their calls to repentance and a return to faithful covenant – despite these voices, which many denounced as the pathetic Jeremiads of a liberal elite, despite these few, annoying voices, the nation prospered. And remember this about Babylon: it was to such a nation, whose preachers had wrapped Israel’s success and Israel’s prosperity and Israel’s election (as “God’s chosen”) and Israel’s cultural and economic way of life, and Israel’s religion in a divine seal of approval – it was to such a nation, that unimaginable crisis came.

Every time human beings have made such arrogant claims – that God is “our God,” that we, and we alone, know God’s will, that we are “in” and they are “out,” that our understanding is the only true understanding, that our scripture (or our understanding of that scripture) is the sole bearer of revelation – every single time a people have made

³ As I read the Old Testament, especially the Eighth Century Prophets (such as Amos, Micah, Hosea, Isaiah), I am amazed at the parallels that I see between the culture of Israel and our own. I find that the prophets’ warnings are still quite contemporary. This comment does not relate only or specifically to events surrounding Hurricane Katrina.

such absolute claims, just offshore the winds begin to blow. They are humbling winds, powerful winds, and they brew a storm of divine destruction⁴ – *for the spirit blows where it chooses*.

Thanks be to God, that in the aftermath of such storms, God always grows up, and though the progress is ever so slow, the Growing God brings us along.

Remember this about Babylon: The Exile marked a momentous change in the lives of the Israelites, for only at the hands of utter destruction could they finally realize just how narrow had been their vision of life, their interpretation of faith, their image of God. Thanks to what the late John Claypool has called a “ministry of interpretation,” the prophet Ezekiel, preaching an unorthodox word – that is, a word contrary to the prevailing majority opinion⁵ – the prophet Ezekiel offered the people a new faith, a new hope, a new God, altogether.

It is frightening to have to give up God.⁶ It is disconcerting and disconnecting to part with friends and family because a once treasured terrain of common faith no longer remains a ground of common convictions. It is frustrating and confusing to give up the trouble-free days of childhood, with its solid ground of easy answers, for the sometimes

⁴ Following worship my wife said to me, “If I didn’t know you, I would have heard this statement as an affirmation that ‘God sent Katrina to punish an unfaithful people.’” I did hesitate with the words “divine destruction” because I believe that it is neither in God’s will nor in God’s power to deliberately control storms. (On my understanding of God’s power see my June 26, 2005 sermon, “Grasping At Silk: Everlasting Arms and the Problem of Pain.”) I settled on “divine destruction” because of the overall emphasis of the sermon, that we cannot control the movement of God (“*The spirit/wind blows where it chooses*”), and this movement often comes with “destructive” force – uprooting our lives, causing upheaval and great change. See below, “It is frightening to have to give up God.”

⁵ Many people would disagree with my understanding that orthodoxy is only a “prevailing majority opinion,” though I suspect most of these would consider themselves orthodox in their opinions! I allow that there is an implied understanding that orthodoxy comes with God’s imprimatur – not simply the vote of a council – but this understanding is tenuous, at best – especially given the many examples of orthodoxy-gone-bad. See, below, the few examples I give of “one generation’s orthodoxy...”

⁶ On this, see John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, chapter two, “The Meaning of Exile and How We Got There.”

troubling ground of divine-disclosure on the one hand and self-discovery on the other. But, as Will Campbell once said, “Once you get educated, nothing is ever easy again!”

But this is precisely the story of the people of God. One generation’s orthodoxy (that is, the prevailing, majority, opinion) is, for the next generation, heresy. Tell me that I am wrong. Before the exile God lived, quite literally, in a box inside one room of an ostentatious shrine in the heart of Jerusalem. But... in exile, the people met a new God whose presence and privilege could not be confined.⁷ They could hardly be called the same God. Before Jesus Christ walked among us, God marched with armies and hurled stones of killing destruction, God sent plagues of death and cloaked himself in Almighty Power. But... in Jesus, the people met a new God whose heart recoiled, within, a God who took pain and sin and death within instead of wielding power without.⁸ They could hardly be called the same God. Before Galileo sighted the stars and charted their courses, God created the world for our pleasure, for we were the center of all that existed. But... in a bigger universe, the people met a new God who was less concerned with human welfare alone than with the nurture and care of all the living cosmos. They could hardly be called the same God. Before Martin Luther King, Jr. marched to Selma, God consigned Americans who traced their ancestry to the African continent to drink out of

⁷ See John Claypool’s book, *Glad Reunion*, especially his chapter on Ezekiel.

⁸ I hesitated with this example because, though as a Christian I affirm that Christ most clearly reveals God to us, it is not entirely fair to say that this God, who takes pain within, was unknown to the Jews before Jesus. In fact, I allude to the language of Hosea in this very statement, “*How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My hear recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim.*” (Hosea 11.8-9) The word for “recoil” (from the Hebrew which means “affecting God’s innards in shattering ways”) is the same word used in the Sodom and Gomorrah story, where God destroys (shatters) the city for its sin. Is not God saying here, “I have ‘grown up’ since I dealt with Sodom?” One ironic point running throughout the sermon is that the God who is “growing up” is the God who has been with us from the very beginning. Even though Christ reveals to us something “new” about God – the loving, self-sacrificing God “revealed in Jesus” has really been with us since Hosea’s prophecy, and, I submit, from the very beginning. See below, “God is always growing into that which God always is:... *God is love.*”

separate water fountains, to ride in the back of buses, to send their children to inferior schools than did European Americans. But after Sunday morning, April 4, 1969...

Do you see where I'm going?⁹ Do you see where we are going, the human race that is – though we have to be drug there, kicking and screaming all the way, every, single time that God grows up? Do you see where God is going – with us?

So many more examples of a growing God could be given. Too many more, in fact, so we must ask... how many more shots will have to ring out in the air of the Memphis, Tennessee's of this world? How many more trials of excommunication will have to be held? How many more crosses will have to be raised to torture the Sons of God before we can realize that God is never going back to be the kind of God that God used to be?

Growing is who God is.

⁹ I was told after the sermon that in some ways this sermon was too difficult, that I had "assumed too much" of my hearers. I do not doubt that this is the case, and accept this as a fair critique of my preaching. Instead of saying, "Do you see where I am going?" perhaps I should have said, "Here is the point..." In this week's pastor's column in our newsletter, I addressed this sermon and the point I was hoping to make. I summarized the sermon, this "where I'm going," as follows:

"The world can only know "God" by the language we use. So, when our understanding changes, we present, literally, a different God to the world. A more "grown up God." We no longer think of God like the Jews in Exiled Babylon — that God has "grown up." (We have grown up.)

In every sea change of theological thought, the generation facing the change has feared, and has tried to hold on to its "old God." These keepers of the status quo have decried impending changes as "heresy." But... *the spirit moves where it chooses...* and, looking back, a new generation decrees just the opposite. (Slavery, once preached as "ordained of God," is almost universally denounced, now, as the sin of a misguided generation.)

I do not deny that our world is frightening, that a storm of change is again blowing. How will we face the questions of pluralism and sexual morality and loss of known "authorities"? I am praying that we will face them with courage. Trusting that the God who has "grown up" so many times in the past, will do so again. In us. And, that God will do so very soon."

The current storm has been called a culture war, and it is – for it is pushing us (and I am speaking especially of American Christians) to rethink, again, the shape of our world, its “truths,” and its “authorities,” to rethink, again, our very image of God. In that war we hear words like: pluralism, family, evolution, homosexuality, genetic engineering, freedom, marriage... I do not know what will become of this war. It frightens me to think how fierce the storm might become. And I do not know what our world will look like when the calm finally comes. But of one thing I am convinced: the God that we have come to know in the face of Jesus Christ is growing, if ever so slowly. And I am convinced that after the storm, we will have moved¹⁰ yet another step toward inclusion, acceptance, forgiveness, community, dialogue, wholeness, relationship. Which is to say that God is always growing into that which God always is: *Beloved, let us love one another, for God is love.*

The spirit blows where it chooses. Let us welcome the winds and pray that God will grow up again, very soon.

May it be so!

¹⁰ I should have said, “we will have been moved” – for the point is that *the spirit blows where it wills*, moving us to places we would never have gone, without the nudge of the Spirit’s gentle breeze, or the “divine destruction” of a gale force hurricane.