

He is doing this from eternity

Ephesians 1:10; Galatians 4:4

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

Our situation as we begin a new church year is like starting a road trip toward a distant mountain range. When you begin to see the foothills and they seem to be not so far away although they are several hundred miles away, you have the sense: "We're almost there!" But the closer you get, the more you see those foothills are pretty big, then come the mountains, only then the peaks. This is where we are in the church year, driving toward the foothills.

We now look forward to what the Lord is doing from eternity to eternity. His plan is in telescoped fashion for us in Advent, and we can unpack it. Today we begin with God's plan as described in the Old and New Testaments, as it seems from the outside.

If you look at it from the outside, when he started out, he created everything good, the garden with Adam and Eve, but then first came sin, then the first murder. Things went downhill fast after that. In Genesis 4 comes Lamech, who says that if Cain took vengeance seven times, he, Lamech, will take revenge seventy-seven times (Genesis 4:24). Everything went wild.

So, the Lord started over again with Noah, eight people, and that didn't work because it ended up with the Tower of Babel. He started over again in Genesis 12 with Abraham. Abraham, as it says in Genesis 22, almost killed his son. And then came Jacob who was a real rascal.

Then they go into Egypt as a family because of famine and disappear. They become slaves. And there, of all things, the Lord picks the Jews, as a way of starting again. There's a famous quip you may know (by an English journalist): "How odd of God to choose the Jews." He starts out with these unknown people, stiff-necked, and with the difficulties through forty years in the wilderness. It was a bad time because they kept on going astray, and finally they reached the promised land.

Then there are fourteen judges (and two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who could be called judges). The Book of Judges has this constant refrain: They have a judge who helps them against the enemy. The judge dies, and they fall into idol worship again. Then an enemy comes and takes them over again, and they repent, and the Lord sends another judge. Finally, the famous last line of the book: "Everybody did what is right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Then the people said they didn't want judges anymore; they wanted kings. So first came King Saul, who was a disaster. He had all these wives and was really tied up with other nations and idolatry. Then came David, who fell into adultery, so there was no way he could build a temple, and so the nation split.

The four hundred years of kings does not go well. The people go into exile. And then some of them say: "Lord, we repent," and after time, seventy years or so, a small group is brought back, and but they're really a vassal state. They are caught by paying taxes and belonging to someone else, except for four years under the Maccabees (167-164 B.C.). Then comes Erza, and he says: "We really have to keep the law," but it isn't much of a success.

Finally, the Lord sends his own Son, who is killed, and all of this is virtually unknown in history, except for four words by a Roman historian named Suetonius. Hardly anyone knew about Jesus or his crucifixion and resurrection, or anything about all that.

As you look at this history from the outside, it is a series of failures. God tries and it fails; God tries and it fails, and it's a mess. Dealing with these people is like herding cats. It just doesn't work well. You end up having to say: Either God isn't all wise because you could see what was going to happen, and you could do something beforehand instead of these series of failures. Or he is not all powerful so he couldn't manage it. It's out of control, and he keeps trying one thing after another.

The people end up then with saying several things about this, that is, as one looks at this history from the outside.

One is to say: It's all meaningless anyway. It's all just chance, just happens. At most it's a kind of charade. It's as if the Lord is sitting under a tree and for a few minutes he has this amusing thing called the whole creation and what happens on earth and all of that. It was just an interesting thing for him to do, a stage where he amuses himself.

Or some say, it's a little more serious than that, but the Lord is not really bothered when people disobey him and sin. He just pats them on the head and says: "That's all right." It doesn't hurt me; I'm the Lord of the universe. Just try to be better.

Or some do, as John Milton does in his epic poem "Paradise Lost," which is great poetry but bad theology. Milton says in the first lines that he is going to justify the ways of God to man. What you see if you read what he says, apart from the great poetry, is that the great hero (or anti-hero) is Satan. It's a kind of speculation about how God didn't quite do it right. In the first place, God ought to convince us. Or he has to give us free will, and then he has to seek in some way to convince us, or make us obey, and that's the whole story of Satan in Milton's "Paradise Lost." Well, why should I? Most people aren't convinced and aren't obedient.

Or some say it's like the poem "The Hound of Heaven" (1890), by Francis Thompson. The Lord chases us until finally, when we're worn out from running away, we're convinced.

Or, another way of going after this is to say: This is the way God should have done it and it is with our help, our planning, our work, and what we need to deal all these troubles, which are theologically called sin, but philosophically called evil, is more

planning and more education. We're baffled by the fact that all of our planning, all of our education, doesn't do it.

Something always goes wrong. Empires fall. The ancient Greeks called it nemesis.

As we look back at all this, again from the outside, it may seem that either it's all foolishness or that God doesn't do very well. He doesn't understand. It's a mess.

What we're given to see in Scripture is that we're looking forward to Christmas and looking through Christmas to Good Friday and Easter. Christmas is the first foothill on the way to the mountain peak beyond. It's important to have the incarnation, but the most important thing is what lies ahead, the cross and resurrection, Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter.

That's counter to the way we speculate, and it's counter to the way Satan in "Paradise Lost" speculates. From eternity the Lord planned to make it all right again. As it says in Ephesians 1:10 (paraphrase): "From eternity he planned to make it all right again." It's poorly translated "to unite all things." It really means "to put a new head on," a new Adam on the human race.

As Paul writes in Galatians 4:4: "When the time had fully come (in the fullness of time), God sent forth his Son . . . to redeem those . . . under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters."

When we then speculate that God isn't doing it right, that we have to understand what it's about, and why isn't it working right with evil, and what is this thing theologians call "sin," we remember first of all, that we're caught in space and time and God isn't. Or we might claim he is caught in infinity, but he's not even caught by infinity.

And the scandal of the fact that this One, who has created everything, became a human being and died and rose again, and that this One, the Holy One took on sin, so that all of the speculation we have is really a temptation to get away from what God is really doing, which is that the answer to the problem of evil, is in the cross.

That's totally scandalous, totally against our way of reckoning things, our way of speculating about God. We have to remember that we get caught by the evil one, who is the father of lies (John 8:44), when we say: This is the way God will do it; this is the way it has to be.

In fact, God looked at this from all eternity and saw there was a terrible problem, and then he solved it his way. We could not have imagined that he would have solved it through the cross and certified it by the resurrection. And he did it by himself, not with us, not with our help.

So finally, there is no way we can solve this. There is no "why." There is the "that" of it, but because we're caught in sin and death, there is no way we can get out of that, and see outside of it and be outside of it.

But our Christian hope and the promise is based on that he has done this, he is doing this from eternity, and we look then, on this first Sunday of the church year, to the foothills, to Christmas and then to the peaks beyond, to Good Friday and Easter. Amen