

Firm Foundations: The LORD God

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 2:8-9,15-17,21-24

We come to the last of our three-part sermon series called Firm Foundations. During tumultuous times, we are setting our feet on foundational things. Genesis 1-3 addresses foundational questions, questions that every human being must come to terms with. Last week we heard what Genesis 1 had to say about the question, what are human beings? Two weeks ago, we heard what Genesis 1 had to say about the nature of the physical world. Today we address the most central question of all. Who is God? All of Genesis 1-3 speaks to this question, but for our scripture readings I will read a selection of passages from Genesis 2 and 3 which really focus the issue. As I have done throughout this series, I will compare what Genesis teaches about God to the myths of Babylon and other surrounding nations. I will do that because, as I explained in some detail last week, Genesis 1-3 in the form we have it now is pushing against those other stories and their claims about God.

If you had to choose one word to describe the Babylonian gods it would be ‘capricious.’ The Babylonian gods were capricious, unpredictable, prone to mood swings and outbursts. One moment they were nice, benevolent, and kind. The next moment, depending on the day and depending on what mood they were in, they could turn on you or turn on each other. *The examples are all through the Enuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh and the other ancient texts.*

Ishtar looks down from her lofty perch and sees Gilgamesh the warrior. She likes what she sees. “Gilgamesh,” she coos, “Won’t you be my boyfriend!?” Gilgamesh patiently explains that he has a poor history with women and that he’s uncomfortable getting involved with a goddess. “Sorry Ishtar, I’m just not ready for a relationship right now.” Ishtar doesn’t take it well. She unleashes the ferocious bull of heaven on Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh’s best friend ends up dead and Gilgamesh ends up devastated.

Or in the Enuma Elish, you have the story of Apsu. He and Tiamat are the Mother and Father of all the gods. All the gods in the Babylonian pantheon are their children and grandchildren. It turns out there’s a bit of a generational conflict between grandpa and the grandkids. The younger gods spend too much time partying and making noise and Grandma and Grandpa can’t sleep. Finally, determined to get some shut eye, sleep deprived Apsu decides that he will simply kill all the younger gods. *“Their behavior has become displeasing to me and I cannot rest in the day-time or sleep at night. I will destroy and break up their way of life that silence may reign and we may sleep.”* The younger gods hear about his plan and they rise up to kill him first. Read through these other myths and you feel like you’re watching an ancient version of Survivor, only one that includes dragons and magic incantations. That’s how the Babylonian gods roll. They’re capricious.

And while you can scoff at the behavior of these gods, and while you might wonder why anyone would worship gods like this, don’t judge the Babylonians too quickly. They believed in these capricious gods because the behavior of their gods felt like the experience of their world. Their life felt capricious. Their life felt like an episode of Survivor. As they went through life, the Babylonians found themselves buffeted by powers that were beyond their control, powers that seemed to burst on them without warning or reason. One day they were going along just fine and the next moment, wham! - something happens which turns their life upside down. They

spend all spring planting their fields and getting ready for harvest and then, just as the barley crop is ready for harvest, a storm sweeps in and a pounding hail flattens the entire crop. They build a home for themselves and their family. They carefully maintain it when suddenly an earthquake strikes and the thing collapses. A young woman marries her beloved. He's strong and healthy but suddenly disease sweeps through the city and in 3 days her husband goes from laughing and strong to weak and gone. The Babylonians found life unpredictable and hard. They found themselves knocked around by random circumstances, and they said, *'Well, that must be how the gods are. These storms, these earthquakes, these plagues that come out of nowhere, they are the tantrums of the unpredictable gods.'*

Can you sympathize a little? I think you can. If you've ever had a friend swept away by an aneurism. If you've ever had a person you loved and leaned on torn out of your life by an untimely cancer diagnosis. If life has ever suddenly whacked you upside the head for no apparent reason, you can at least understand why they believed what they did.

The Bible acknowledges that life can feel capricious. Psalm 90 is one of our favorite psalms. We usually read it on New Year's Eve. "Lord You have been our dwelling place throughout the generations." Remember that Psalm? In the middle of that Psalm, in verse 15 the Psalmist blurts out, *"Make us glad for as many days as you've afflicted us."* It's an honest cry. It's the cry of a person who's been knocked around and can't make sense of it. Job has a similar cry. In the midst of his frustration, after life has most definitely whacked him upside the head, he accuses God of being capricious. *"When a scourge brings sudden death, he mocks the despair of the innocent; when land falls into the hands of the wicked, he blindfolds its judges! If it is not he, then who?"* The chaotic parts of life are real. Sometimes they lead people to imagine capricious gods. Sometimes they make people give up on God altogether.

That brings us to Genesis 1-3. In Genesis 1 we get a different picture of God. In Genesis 1-3 God reveals himself to storm-tossed people. I don't think Genesis 1 answers all our questions about the storm, but God reveals himself and speaks a strong word to us in this passage. There are a couple of things about God's character I want to highlight this morning and for each of those things, I want you show you a detail from the text and then I want to lift up what God is saying to us through that detail.

The first detail is his name. If you pay close attention, you will notice that throughout chapters 2 and 3, God is called by the same name. He's called the LORD God. "The LORD God planted a garden. The LORD formed man from the dust of the ground. The LORD God made garments of skin." That's his name throughout these two chapters. If you have a Bible with you and open you will see that the word LORD is capitalized in the English. Almost all translations do this. Do you know why? It tells you that the Hebrew word translated by LORD is the word Yahweh. Whenever you see a capitalized LORD in your Bible, it's the translation of the divine name Yahweh. And the divine name is used throughout our passage.

There is one exception. There is one time when the divine name is not used. Did you notice the exception? It's when the serpent speaks. When the serpent talks about God he does not use the divine name. He does not call him Yahweh, he only calls him by the more generic Elohim. Elohim is the word you would use for any of those gods from the surrounding nations. *"Did God really say 'you must not eat from any tree in the garden? God knows that if you eat of it your eyes will be opened."* Notice how he drops the LORD?

Why does the serpent do that? He's trying to make the Lord sound like one of those capricious, deceptive Babylonian gods. *"That God of yours is trying to pull the wool over your eyes. He doesn't want you to know what he knows. He's just trying to control you!"* If the serpent

wants to make the Lord sound like one of the Babylonian gods, of course he doesn't want to call him Yahweh. Remember what the name means? I am who I am. I will be who I will be. It's the covenant name. It means faithfulness. To call God Yahweh is to call him the opposite of unpredictable. *"I am Yahweh, I am who I am, and I will be who I will be. I am Yahweh, I am the same yesterday, today and forever. I am the Lord, I don't waffle. I maintain justice and righteousness in this world. I am the Lord, storms may come but my promise to you and my purposes for this world will not fail."*

The evil one still tries to convince us that God is like one of those Babylonian deities. *"I know you've heard your whole life that God is good, and he is with you and that he loves you but come on. Look around you at the storm! He doesn't care about you."* But the name of God speaks a better word than the voice of the serpent. *"I am Yahweh. I am the LORD God. I know the storm is loud, but I am here, and my promise stands."* The first detail is the name, the second detail is the clothes. At the end of the story, after human sin had ruined the peace of the garden, the LORD does something unexpected: he makes of skin for Adam and his wife. He clothes them. He clothes them so they can face a world that has become cold and dangerous world. He clothes them so that they can cope with the shame that they've brought upon themselves. It's more than they deserve. It's an act of grace. *It's also an act of deep, caring intimacy.* If you've ever dressed an infant, you know that putting clothing on someone is a moment of loving connection. I remember dressing my kids for bed. Toweling them off after their bath. Laying them down on the changing table. Getting them into their footie pajamas. Talking to them as you snuggled them into their clothes. It was a moment of connection, intimacy. Of course, when the Lord dressed Adam and Eve, it was less like a parent dressing a cute baby and it was more like a caregiver dressing a dependent adult. The woman's husband can no longer get dressed or go to the bathroom by himself. Every morning she helps him into his clothes. Her own hands are weakened by arthritis, but she pulls on his socks, she gets arms through his shirt sleeves, finally she patiently fastens each button of her husband's shirt. He gets confused during the day. There are moments when he's okay, but then all of a sudden he will be confused and afraid of his surroundings. "Where am I!? What's going on!? Who are you!?" Sometimes when she makes him take his medicine or won't let him drive, he even speaks harshly and angrily to her. She tries to explain and sometimes he understands for a second, but then he forgets all over again. And when he forgets, he lashes out again in fear and uncertainty. So, the faithful loving wife says over and over again, *"It's okay. I'm here. You're going to be okay. I'm your wife. I love you."* Her reassurances are new every morning.

When God clothes Adam and Eve, it's a little like the act of that caregiver, an act of pain and sacrifice that he does out of love for the people he made. And so we see that the God revealed to us in Genesis 1-3 is not just a God of eternal steadiness and cosmic promises; his love moves towards us in a way that is personal, intimate, sacrificial. It won't be the last time he clothes his frightened people. This whole book is the story of this loving God clothing his frightened and confused people again and again. One day much later, in Jesus, God will actually come in the flesh to his confused and frightened people. But in their anger, these people he loves so much will lash out at him. They will hit him and call him terrible names. They will grab him and they will strip Jesus of his clothes and they will nail him naked to a cross of shame. On that cross Jesus will take all of their sin and guilt and shame upon himself so that it can be destroyed. He will rise from the dead and he will clothe his children in new life. Again, just like in Genesis, it's an act of grace. Only this time it won't just be animal skins, this time he clothes them in the shining garment of his righteousness. He clothes them in righteousness divine. Because of this

second gracious act of dressing us, at the very end of the story, when all things are made new, we will find ourselves in that great company John saw in his vision *“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”* I don’t understand all the things that come into the lives of good people. I don’t understand why terrible and perplexing stuff comes out of nowhere and whacks us upside the head. But I know whom I have believed. I know where my hope lies. I know who my God is. I know that he is my cornerstone, my solid ground. I know that he is firm through the fiercest drought and storm. I know that every time I’ve fallen, every time my sin or my circumstances have beaten me down, he has picked me up and clothed me. He is my God, and he’s yours too. Blessed are those who take refuge in him.

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