

**SERMON – 09/06/09**  
**THE GRAND SWEEP – pt. 1**  
*“In the Beginning: origins, exile, & deliverance”*

In 1972, Jim Croce had a top 10 song entitled, “You don’t mess around with Jim.”

- The chorus went like this:
  - “You don’t tug on Superman’s’ cape...
  - “You don’t spit into the wind...
  - “You don’t pull the mask off that old Lone Ranger...
  - “And you don’t mess around with Jim!”
- What I’m about to attempt could also fall under the category of “THINGS YOU SHOULDN’T TRY TO DO...” but hey, I’m going to do it anyway!
  - Over the course of the next 4 weeks of sermons, I’m going to attempt to summarize the **entire Bible**...
  - I’m calling this series... THE GRAND SWEEP...
  - And I hope that by the time we’re done, you’ll not only have a better sense of what happens throughout the various books of the Bible...
  - But also have a sense of **the big themes that run throughout scripture!**
- I’ve had more than one person tell me, “Pastor Jim... I want to read the Bible... I really do! But I just don’t get it. I don’t know where to start? And when I do... I don’t really understand it!”
  - If you’ve ever thought those kinds of thoughts... then this series is for you!
  - You will not know everything there is to know about the Bible when we’re done... I guarantee you that...
  - But hopefully... by the grace of God... you won’t be intimidated before you pick it up...
  - And you’ll have a basic understanding of what the Bible is trying to say to us today...

One of the books that I've been reading to help me better prepare for this series is J. Ellsworth Kalas' *A Hop, Skip, and a Jump Through the Bible*.

- Rev. Kalas is a retired United Methodist pastor... the president of Asbury Theological Seminary... has been a presenter on the wildly-popular "Disciple Bible Study" series... and is an author of numerous books...
- In *Hop, Skip & a Jump*, Dr. Kalas remarks...
  - "The Bible was written by scores of authors over hundreds of years, and in two different languages (Hebrew & Greek). Most of the authors never knew one another, and in a majority of instances, they had no idea of what the others wrote.
  - "It's hard to imagine scores of authors separated by time and space, living in very different historical periods with experiences unique to their periods coming up with a continuing theme, let alone any really discernible plot..."
- And yet... there is a plot. A DIVINE PLOT!
  - It's the story of God's relationship with our human race.
  - You might even call it a "love story"... between God and His people...
  - And yet, as Kalas puts it, it's the story of divine love putting up with our indifference & rebellion!
- Now in order to discover this plot... this Grand Sweep... we get to see it unfold in the lives of people – specific people... the characters from Scripture...
  - The amazing thing about the Bible... is that as we read it... as we search for the Grand Sweep... we also get a sense that the plot continues from the pages of The Good Book... into the pages of our lives!
  - When we read the Bible in faith... WE BECOME PART OF THE PLOT!
- You see, friends... this sermon series isn't about you being able to know more about the Bible (head knowledge)...
  - It's about you being able to better LIVE OUT YOUR FAITH (heart knowledge)...
  - Engaging in THE STORY... the Grand Sweep...
  - So without further adieu... to borrow a phrase from Maria von Trapp, "let's start at the very beginning... a very good place to start!"

Open your Bibles to Genesis, chapter one...

- By the way, we're going to be using our Bibles a lot during this series... if you have one at home, I encourage you to bring it each week...
  - If you don't have one, you can always borrow the red pew bibles under your seats here in the sanctuary...
  - Then again, this might be a great time for you to pick up a new Bible... and start bringing it to church!
- Genesis 1:1... *"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And here was evening and there was morning, the first day."* (Gen. 1:1-5)
  - In the beginning... there was GOD... and nothing else. Period.
  - The storyteller isn't interested in how God came to be... just that when it all began, God was already here!
- And these opening 5 verses tell us something quite amazing about our God... if we look closely enough...
  - In the beginning... GOD CREATED...
  - We serve a Creator God... who likes to create!
  - We also serve a God whose presence is also in SPIRIT...
  - v. 2 tells us that a "wind from God" swept over the face of the waters...
  - The Hebrew word here is RUAH... and it can also be translated "The Spirit of God"...
  - You might even call this a Holy Spirit...
  - And then in verse 3, "God said..."
  - God is present in THE WORD...
  - (Which is significant if we skip ahead a bit to the New Testament... the Gospel of John... and we're reminded that Jesus was "The Word become flesh" who dwelt among us...

- So here, in the first 3 verses... of the very first chapter... of the very first book... we're told that God is so amazing, He can be expressed in 3 forms... Creator, Spirit, & Word!
- Maybe that's why... in verse 26... when it's time for humans to be created, God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness..."
- God isn't schizophrenic... but this is evidence that God existed in the form of the Trinity from the very beginning...
- These opening verses also tell us that **God is a communicator**...
  - If you follow through the rest of chapter one, you'll see that for every part of creation... GOD SPEAKS... and things happen.
  - Then God follows it up by saying (to himself!?! ) that it's all good...
  - God is so in love with what is being made, that he talks to it!
  - Which tells me that **prayer makes sense**... for God loves to communicate!

I've discovered that when you start to read any section of the Bible, there are 3 great questions you should be asking as you read:

- What does this passage tell me about God?
  - What does this passage tell me about human beings?
  - What does this tell me about the relationship between God & us?
- Some people aren't aware that there are actually TWO CREATION STORIES in Genesis...
  - Story #1 encompasses all of chapter 1 and the first 3 verses of chapter 2...
  - We've already talked about some of the insights about God this first story gives... Including the fact that God sees everything he has created as "good!"
  - That we're all created in God's image... (so there's divine in each of us!)
  - And the fact that God has ordained REST as part of the cycle & rhythm of our weekly lives...
- Creation Story #2 is the "Adam & Eve" story that so many are familiar with... beginning at Genesis 2:4ff... and running for about 3 chapters:
  - It's the Garden of Eden... Serpent... Forbidden Fruit... Naked-with-fig-leaves story...

- This story tells us a lot about us as humans... and how we've let sin creep into our world... and our relationship with God.
- One of the lessons this 2<sup>nd</sup> story tells us (or at least me)... is that whether good or bad, the choices we make always have consequences.
- In addition... these consequences are never limited simply to the persons who make them...
- What we do affects others... including God (or at least our relationship with God!).
- By the time we get to chapter 6, things on earth had gone from bad to worse. Verse 5ff:
  - *“The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen. 6:5-6).*
  - So along comes a man named **NOAH**...
  - Noah was one of the few people who actually didn't have a completely evil & wicked heart... and God put him on that infamous “floating zoo building project”...
  - God's judgment comes upon the earth by way of a flood... floods from above & floods from below overwhelm the earth... leaving nothing left but what was carried on the ark (or so the story goes).
  - And the countless animals that didn't find their names on Noah's shortlist suffered because of the sins of humanity.
- Near the end of this story (Gen. 9:13 to be exact), we find a RAINBOW...
  - God has decided that if He reverts to wiping out the whole human race every time we mess up... he might not get anywhere...
  - So God relents on his punishment... and opts for **mercy & grace**...
  - A theme that we'll find sweeping in and out of the divine story all throughout the Bible!

In chapter 12, we meet ABRAHAM & SARAH (actually Abram & Sarai at this point)... A story that makes all of our senior citizens stand up and cheer!

- God chooses them at the ripe old ages of 75 & 66, respectively... to begin an amazing journey...
  - He doesn't even tell them WHERE they're going... simply to trust him.
  - He promises to give them two things: their own LAND... and their own PEOPLE.
  - But here's the neat part of God's call on their lives... God is going to make them a blessing – but not just for the two of them alone, or even for their soon-to-be multitude of offspring...
  - "...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:3b)
  - Though the Bible talks about God's special relationship with His people (the Hebrews in the OT – and the Christian Church in the NT)... there's another thread that runs even deeper...
  - And that's the understanding that God's ultimate object of love is the **entire human race!**
  - God is always looking to widen the circle of those who choose to be in relationship with Him...
- Abe & Sarah are definitely not perfect... at times they make decisions that are, well... quite puzzling, to be frank.
  - As Dr. Kalas puts it, it's a reminder that God has no perfect persons with whom to work...
  - So God opts for the best available...
  - And three of the great world faiths: Judaism, Christianity & Islam... all look to Abraham as the father of their faith!
- Next comes ISAAC... the child of Abraham & Sarah's old age (Abe had just reached the century mark!)...
  - He's most known for his nearly being sacrificed by his Dad... a very interesting story in Genesis 22...
  - Isaac's only other memorable moment came much later in his life... when he was deceived by the younger of his twin boys, Jacob...
- JACOB is another one of those not-so-perfect people that God somehow uses...

- Jacob's name literally means "Grabber," and that's what he did most of his life – grabbed for whatever he could get his hands on... birthrights, blessings, wives, sheep, etc.
- Yet after Jacob's crucial encounter with God in chapter 32... God changes his name to Israel... a name that then became the name of God's chosen people!
- Jacob had 12 sons & 1 daughter by his two wives (sisters Leah & Rachel), and two concubines...
- We speak of the offspring of Jacob as "The 12 Tribes of Israel."
- (And how many disciples did Jesus choose to follow him? 12! Coincidence? No!)
- JOSEPH... one of Jacob's sons... comes into the spotlight in Genesis 37... and most of the following 14 chapters (nearly 1/3 of the entire book of Genesis) have Joseph as the lead character!
  - The story itself is fascinating... a young punk dreamer with a big ego, gets on the nerves of his 11 other brothers...
  - Is sold into slavery to Egypt... prospers... then is wrongly accused of sexual harassment... thrown in jail... forgotten... then almost miraculously elevated to 2<sup>nd</sup>-in-command of all of Egypt!
  - But the most important part of Joseph's story... is that he's the reason this extended family gets to Egypt.
  - We need them to be in Egypt for the next part of God's divine story to unfold...
  - You see... in Egypt, over time... they will be made into slaves, so the Egyptians will not marry them... nor will they want to marry the Egyptians...
  - And this is how the "children of Israel" become the NATION of Israel!
- When Joseph gets ready to die at the end of the book of Genesis... he reminds his brothers of the "bigger picture" that was promised to their ancestor, Abraham:
  - *(Gen 50:24) "Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.'"*
  - He even asks his brothers to take his bones with them, when they leave Egypt!

When we get to the book of EXODUS... nearly 400 years after Joseph's death... the scene has changed dramatically!

- When they originally came to Egypt, they were an extended family of just under 100 people...
  - Now... (*Ex.1:7*) “*The Israelites were fruitful & prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.*”
  - And of course, the new leaders have forgotten who Joseph was, and the position of authority he once held...
  - So the Israelites are seen as a potential enemy to the Egyptians... and are oppressed as slaves... quite severely!
  - The current King of Egypt (aka “Pharaoh”) puts a plan in place to kill off all of the Hebrew boys... drown them in the river!
  - But one survives...
- A husband & wife from the tribe of LEVI dare to defy the king's decree... and save their newborn baby boy...
  - Eventually putting him in a basket & setting him adrift on the Nile River...
  - And gets pulled out of the water by none other than Pharaoh's daughter... so he is raised in Pharaoh's own house, believe it or not.
  - God used the playbook of the enemy as the instrument of grace for his survival...
  - The boy's name becomes MOSES... named after the act of pulling him out of the water...
  - Mo spends the first 40 years of his life in Pharaoh's courts... then flees to the hills to escape a murder charge (he was guilty!)... another 40 years as a shepherd... before God calls him to the task at hand – DELIVERANCE!
- The book of EXODUS gets its name because it's the story of a grand EXIT...
  - From slavery & captivity... to freedom!
  - (This is why the African-American slaves of this country adopted Moses' story as their own... a template for political freedom, if you will!)
  - And although there is this grand march of freedom... more than half of the pages of Exodus are spent in the giving of the **law** (i.e., 10 Commandments & beyond)... and the plans for Israel's first **place of worship**.

- We can't just be a people of law... we need to balance that with worship... communion with God...

The book of LEVITICUS... gets its name from the tribe of Levi – the same tribe Moses came from!

- There's a point in the Exodus story when the tribe of Levi comes to the aid of Moses, when all others fall away...
  - And from that day forward, the Levites were set aside as **the Priestly Tribe**.
  - They provided MUSIC for worship...
  - They were the CARETAKERS of the place of worship...
  - They also TAUGHT the law (ie. Israel's teachers)...
  - And INTERPRETED the law (Israel's lawyers)...
  - Then even EXAMINED the people when certain illnesses arose... (so they were like medical counselors, as well!)
- When the people of Israel eventually settled into the Promised Land, the Levites had no land of their own...
  - Instead they were given 48 cities spread throughout Israel to live in...
  - And the other tribes supported the Levites through their tithes & offerings.
- So the book of Leviticus is sort of like the "rules of sacred etiquette"...
  - Dr. Kalas reminds us that when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandments... he replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart... soul... strength... and mind... and love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:28-31).
  - That last part comes from Lev. 19:18...
  - If the Grand Sweep of Scripture is all about God's relationship to the human race...
  - Then Leviticus is about maintaining that relationship through sacred rituals... and a deep concern for anything that might get in the way of our loving one another.

The book of NUMBERS... gets its name from the census of Israel, taken when they were wandering around in the wilderness... on their way to the Promised Land.

- Moses has led them out of slavery & captivity in Egypt... and they're getting close to their destination... so close they can taste it!
  - So Mo sends out 12 spies... one from each of the 12 tribes...
  - Their job is to scout out the land... & bring back a report (along with some fruit, if they can find any!).
  - They come back with a large amount of fruit... and a large amount of fear!
  - 10 of the 12 believe it's too dangerous a place... the people are too big – they'd never survive.
  - The other 2 (Joshua & Caleb) disagree... and call the people to trust God to provide!
  - The people follow the 10... quite possibly because **it's always easier to do nothing, than to attempt to tackle a challenge!**
- The result of the people's unwillingness to follow God's lead into the new land... amounted to 40 more years of wilderness wandering...
  - Which was enough time for the older generation to die off...
  - Them... along with their own self-doubts... and their doubts about God... all left in the wilderness...
  - It's another theme that's been repeated all through time... the human tendency to doubt God's provisions... and God's call...
  - And the price we have to pay when that happens...
- There are other happenings in the book of Numbers...
  - Including people challenging Moses' authority to lead... (even among his own brother and sister!)
  - And some extremely funny stories surrounding Balaam & his donkey... (chapters 22-23!).
  - And just as the book ends, we get to meet Moses' successor... a young man named Joshua!

Finally, for today... we come to the book of DEUTERONOMY... which gets its name from the Greek words meaning “second law.”

- Dr. Kalas calls this book “Moses' valedictory address”...

- The people are now on the edge of the land that had been promised to their ancestors many, many years before...
- So the book of Deuteronomy tells its story in two ways...
- First, by **recounting God's wondrous acts** on behalf of Israel... reminding everyone of the marvelous things God has done for them!
- Second, Deuteronomy **reminds the people of God's laws**...
- At the end of the book, Moses reminds the people of just how important these two aspects are: remember the past & keeping God's laws...
  - Turn with me to Deuteronomy 32:46ff...
  - *“(Moses) said to them, ‘Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life; through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess.’”*
  - Don't forget, Moses reminds them... don't forget!
- And with that, Moses dies... never himself getting to enter the promised land...
  - Deuteronomy concludes with this: *“Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform... and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that (he) performed in the sight of all of Israel.” (34:11-12)*
  - And we see the Hebrew people right on the edge of entrance ... in the capable hands of the young Joshua...

And that's where we're going to leave this series as well...

- You won't want to miss next week... as we'll finish the entire Old Testament (believe it or not)...
- May God continue to help each of us understand how WE fit into The Grand Sweep of this amazing Biblical Story! AMEN.