

# EEN

Sermon Starter: February/March 2018

## “Contingent”

*Scripture passages: Psalm 103, Psalm 104:24-35, Genesis 12:1-3*

I became an uncle for the first time almost exactly one year ago. From the moment my sister announced to us that her and her husband were expecting their first, I began imagining what my new niece might be like: whose eyes would she have, what would make her belly laugh, what kind of future was in store for this little one? And while I've received answers to the first two questions since her arrival last September—my sister's eyes, and dancing like an idiot—the last answer remains elusive. She has given us thrilling peeks into her personality—with its likes, dislikes, preferences, tendencies, and habits—but how all of these will coalesce to form her unique calling in the world remains a mystery.

While the exact shape of my niece's future remains shrouded, one truth about her past and her present is abundantly clear: She is utterly dependent, in every way, upon her parents. Anyone who has had a child, grandchild, niece, or nephew knows this truth full well. It bowls you over from the very first moments that you learn of the new life nestled inside its mother's womb, gaining nutrients and oxygen through the twin miracle of umbilical cord and blood. The truth grows as you gain grainy, ultrasonic sneak peeks of the growing child throughout the pregnancy. The truth is confirmed throughout the early days after delivery and beyond, as the young child depends on everyone else for the necessities of food, hygiene, shelter, and touch that are so necessary for its survival. Nothing about its continued health and well-being is within its control, but comes to it from outside of itself as an act of sheer, sacrificial love.

And we often like to think that as we grow older, wiser, and more capable, we overcome this total dependency. We learn to clothe and bathe ourselves. We learn to cook and to prepare our own food. We gain marketable skills, get a job, and buy or rent our own sources of shelter.

We breathe in the Western values of autonomy and independence, believing that we are self-made people standing on our own two feet; islands of self-sufficiency rooted in the bedrock of personal freedom, which all too often means freedom from the shame of depending on anyone else for our needs.

We're told that the power to make something of ourselves in the world is completely in our hands, despite the complex web of power structures and privilege always at work either giving us a leg up or blunting the effects of our hard work. We're told to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, and forget that many in society haven't even been given boots to begin with. American cultural images are steeped in the rugged individualism of Western modernity—the lone cowboy out on the prairie, the covered wagon pushing courageously westward into the unknown, the Statue of Liberty holding solitary vigil, the lonely bald eagle flying high above the world, self-made millionaires who are dependent on no one and nothing for their happiness or livelihoods.

And in this hyper-individualistic American setting, it is the independent and the self-sufficient who receive our collective praise and admiration. And our scorn? Well that's reserved for the dependent, those unable to lift themselves up out of poverty or violence. Refugees escaping terror and seeking safety, food-stamp and Medicaid recipients trying to feed their families and keep them healthy, those who find themselves addicted to a substance or a destructive habit in order to get through the day—these are the people that our society resents and pushes to the margins. Perhaps, if we are perfectly honest with ourselves, they are those who *we* resent and look down upon. Those who need a crutch; who aren't strong enough to make it on their own.

“Independence and autonomy is strength,” shouts our 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture, “and dependence is weakness.” We hear it all day every day from our textbooks, our televisions, our celebrities. But our psalm this evening begs to differ. It shouts a very different truth: that dependence is the fundamental shape of creation; the fundamental shape of our existence in the world. That contingency—that is to say, being utterly dependent upon another for one's very existence—that is strength, **and that our contingency upon God is very good news.**

Now the first 23 verses of our psalm, the verses that we didn't read, are bursting with joy at the dizzying diversity with which God has fashioned the world. To read these verses is to imagine a psalmist abuzz with the energy of her praise, unable to stand still as she names yet another reason to praise the Creator God: gushing springs, the fruit of the earth, cattle, wine, bread, trees, wild goats, young lions—all are cause afresh for her to leap from her seat and laugh out loud at the sheer goodness of it all.

Old Testament scholar James Mays notes that Psalm 104 reads as a poetic version of God's own self-appraisal in Genesis 1 when he looked over and over again at what he had made and saw that it was good. Our psalmist clearly agrees with God's self-assessment and aches to add her own poetic affirmation to God's creative goodness. Psalm 104 is her project of praise, and its climax is reached in the first verse of our passage this evening. After running the gamut of God's creative excellence—from mighty mountains to minute mountain mice—she exclaims with joy, “Oh Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”

And then the psalmist makes a rather surprising move—at least, a surprising move to those of us steeped in a culture that celebrates autonomy and scorns dependence. She celebrates the contingency of creation; the truth that all creation is dependent upon God for its existence—that *we* are dependent upon God for *our* existence. Verses 27 to 30 are all dedicated to driving this singular point home, reminding us that all of God's manifold works look to God for their survival; that it is only when God opens his hand that we are filled with good things, and it is when God hides his face that we are terrified; that it is only when God sends forth his breath—as he did in Genesis—that God's creatures are animated with the breath of life.

“Creation is infinitely complex, varied, and impressive,” claims the psalmist, “but apart from God, it is nothing.” The Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way: “...all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.” In other words, existence is a daily, moment to moment gift of grace. **Life in God's creation is contingent, and this, argues the psalmist, is precisely what makes it so good!**

But how can this be? How in the world can dependence; contingency be good news? The key, argues Psalm 104, is the nature of the One upon whom we are so dependent. And what is the nature of the One that we and the rest of creation depend upon for our breath from one moment

to the next? Well to answer that question, we have to look not only at Psalm 104, but Psalm 103 as well.

Many scholars believe that Psalm 103 and 104 are a set, meant to be read together—each one interpreted by the other. Both psalms are bookended by the “Bless the Lord, of my soul” formulation, the only place that the phrase shows up in the entire psalter. Both are hymns of praise to God, one for God’s covenant faithfulness with Israel and the other for God’s goodness as the creator who provides. We’re not sure whether the two psalms share an author or a tradition, but we can be sure that as the psalms were edited and collated, these psalms were placed together with great intention. And here’s why: the contingent nature of our existence, our need for God’s ongoing creative breath to fill us from one moment to the next, is only good news because this creative God is also the faithful God. The God who creates—who creates us and who daily sustains us—is the same God who kept his promises to Israel when Israel did nothing to deserve it and when his fidelity came at the steepest cost imaginable.

To understand what this truly means, we have to remember the cultural and religious context of these psalms. They are written by the Jewish community—a community that understood itself to be in a unique relationship with God; a covenant relationship. A covenant that was cut between God and Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12. A covenant that promised blessing for Israel not for their own sake, but for the sake of the entire world. It is a staggering and beautiful promise, and it is a trust that Abraham breaks almost immediately. And it is a promise that Israel—Abraham’s descendants—continued to break time and time again for millennia to follow.

But God’s fidelity to his people—God’s righteousness to the covenant—never wavered. Through all of Israel’s torrid infidelities, God continued to move inexorably toward his people. When they were suffering in Egypt, God delivered them by his mighty hand and his outstretched arm. When they settled in the land of Canaan and turned—over and over again—away from God and toward their own way, God sent judges to bring them back to himself. When they finally began to prosper as a nation, with a king and a capital city, getting fat on the wealth gained through conquest and forgetting the parameters of their covenant responsibilities, God sent prophets to remind them of their covenant obligations to care for the poor, to stand on the side of the oppressed, and to worship him alone. And when they still refused to listen, he sent them into exile—itsself an act of deep, sacrificial covenant love as any parent who has ever had to discipline a child well knows. And after exile, he delivered them out again and called them back to himself. And finally, in the fullness of time, he became human himself in order to be the perfect covenant partner that Israel had failed to be, to pay the price of humanity’s infidelity, and to usher in his kingdom of justice and peace.

This is the central story of the scriptures: that no matter how unfaithful Israel was to their covenant relationship, God’s faithfulness was stronger and it never wavered; his plan to bless all the world through Israel would be fulfilled.

And this is the central story animating Psalm 104. Having been shouted by Psalm 103, it now pulses beneath the surface of 104, infusing every letter and informing the psalmist’s audacious claim of the goodness of contingency; the blessing of dependence. Contingence is indeed good news, argues the psalmist, because we and the rest of creation are contingent upon the One who has proven himself over and over again to be faithful, even as his creation finds ever more creative ways to spit in his face and to scorn his love.

So how are we to respond to this good news; to the counter-cultural invitation to reject isolation and to embrace dependence? Many today would run as far away as possible from this so-called good news—indeed, many do. Many of us resist the call to surrender control and instead hold all the tighter to the narratives and practices that offer us the illusion of independence, often to the great harm and detriment of ourselves, of others, and of the world around us which are all bound up in the web of interdependent contingency as well.

Rather than our knee-jerk cultural reaction of resistance or resentment, our psalmist offers us a different example: a response of praise. Now it's true that the entire psalm is one of praise, but the final 4 verses kick it up a notch. After extoling all of God's creative works and after professing their radical dependence on God, the psalmist breaks into new rounds of heightened praise. We can almost see her welling up with tears as the sheer goodness of it all threatens to overwhelm her as she jumps up and down in gratitude: "May the glory of the Lord endure forever! May the Lord rejoice in his works! I will sing to the Lord as long as I live! I will sing praise to my God while I have being! May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord! Bless the Lord, O my soul! Praise the Lord!"

The sheer joy of it all brings to mind the words of St. Irenaeus, an early 2<sup>nd</sup> century church leader, that "the glory of God is a human being fully alive." Our world bombards us on all sides, clamoring to offer us the key to a full life. You want to be fully alive? Buy this car, take these pills, have the perfect body, buy a home in the suburbs, get the promotion, get the prestigious degree—then you'll be fully alive! And it is into this cacophony that the wisdom of Psalm 104 breaks forth like a clarion call. "You want to be fully alive?" asks Psalm 104. "You want the good news? Surrender. Recognize your radical contingency and do not fight it. Embrace the freedom of your utter dependence, because you are not dependent on just anybody. You are held in the hand of the creating, sustaining, covenant-keeping God. The God who will never let your foot slip; who will never let you go. Believe in this truth, and rejoice in its freedom."

The future of our lives, like my little niece's, is a mystery. It is one of the immutable truths of human experience. We do not know where our futures will end up, and the older we get, the more we realize how little control we even have over the direction in which they are headed. But the good news of Psalm 104 today is that even while our futures are hidden from us, they are not hidden from God. In fact, they are more secure than we could ever imagine, because they are held by the God so in love with his contingent creation that he chose to enter into it himself and to wrench it around from the inside rather than to see it lost to sin and death.

As John Calvin says in his commentary on this psalm, Psalm 104 "is intended to strengthen our confidence in regard to the future, that we may not live in the world in a state of constant fear and anxiety...God bears the character of the best of fathers (and we can say of mothers, too), who takes pleasure in tenderly cherishing his children and in bountifully nourishing them."

Friends, the world is well-parented—*we* are well-parented. The One who has created it all is the same one who sustains it through his covenant-keeping promises—promises made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Promises to redeem broken lives, promises to empower with his Spirit, promises to renew all things, promises to fully bring his kingdom of love, justice, and shalom. This is the God who holds our lives from one moment to the next—thanks be to God.