

January 21, 2018

TEXT: Genesis 1: 26–31

TITLE: Christ & Cavemen – part 2

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

On the southern tip of Spain there's the tiny peninsula of Gibraltar. On its eastern side there is a cave facing the Mediterranean Sea that people call "Gorham's cave."¹ Archaeologists have been carefully exploring it because it appears that Neanderthals lived there for thousands of years. Outside the cave they found a shallow pit where there used to be campfires; where they've found bones and mollusk shells, and evidence of flint being sharpened into axes. But the campfire outside the cave isn't what is so interesting. If you step inside the cave, you come to the narrow, rear chambers. Along one wall there is a ledge—almost like a bench—where someone carved in the stone a pattern of 13 grooves. More precisely, where 39,000 years ago a Neanderthal carved 13 cross-hatched grooves. It's the original hashtag.

A few feet away is another hearth with evidence that fires were burnt there. By carefully peeling back the layers of sand inside the cave, scientists can distinguish the fires first used by Neanderthals from those that came later—20,000 years later, when modern Homo sapiens also used this cave for shelter. They left on one wall evidence of their presence—a painting of a beautiful red stag. Another 18,000 years pass and the sand reveals a time when seafaring Phoenicians used this cave for shelter, leaving behind shards of their pottery near the hearth. And then 3000 years after them, a certain British Captain named Gorham entered that cave—sat on the ledge and wrote above the entrance to the inner chamber in blocky letters: Gorham's Cave, 1907—doing so exactly over the spot where Neanderthals had carved their hashtag 39,000 years earlier.

We look back 40,000 years and catch glimpses of the range of human life—from Neanderthals to modern sea captains, totally different from one another yet similar in many ways: all seeking shelter from storms, fires for warmth, benches to rest upon, and ways to leave their mark as a testimony that they were there. Human history goes back much further than what we individually remember. An honest Christian faith needs to look at that long history as evidence of God's abiding care and Christ's redemption even when the stories stretch back to the dawn of time and Neanderthal caves.

As I mentioned last week, the book of Genesis opens with two creation stories. The older version, found in chapter 2, arose about 1000 BC from a culture that survived by tending herds and growing crops of grain in the fickle soil of ancient Palestine. That is why the Genesis 2 creation story focuses on soil (adamah) and how God made a human (adam) from that same life-giving soil. The creation story in Genesis 1 came later, likely being composed about 600 BC when the Hebrews were living in exile in Babylon. There they were surrounded by temples dedicated to strange gods; there they heard Babylonian creation stories that told of ancient dragons and mighty warriors totally foreign to Hebrew ears.

The Hebrews worshiped a different God—a single God—and so they wanted to be sure that their children learned a different story of creation—one that started this way: *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...And God said, "Let there be light" and there was light.* Genesis 2 is practical, down-to-earth, focusing on soil and gardens and people to pull weeds. Genesis 1 is cosmological, grand in its vision, putting God's fingerprints over all that is and that has come to be.

Only near the end of that story do human beings make an appearance. And what is distinctive about them is not that they grow crops and tend animals. No, what is distinctive is what is said about our ancestors: Genesis 1:26—*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. We bear the image, the likeness of God in our very being.* But what do you think that refers to? It is likely not that we bear a physical resemblance to God. In John 4, Jesus told the Samaritan woman "God is spirit and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). Plus, the miracle of the incarnation is that God took on human flesh; God took on our nature in Jesus Christ—not that God resembled us all along. No, to be in God's likeness involves something other than our physicality.

Maybe, since God is our Creator being in the likeness of God involves our ability to create—to make and build, to paint on cave walls and compose Brandenburg Concertos. Maybe it involves our intellect, our consciousness, our ability to imagine, hope and dream. Those are all reasonable options. But whatever this image of God in us truly is, it has to be something that potentially everyone possesses—and that all have possessed since the dawn of time. It can't be something that 21st century humans possess, but wasn't there in the Middle Ages. It can't be something that people have only had since the time of Christ, since God has been at work in the world before that—in the days of ancient Israel, the time of King David, Abraham and Sarah. And like the layers of sand in Gorham's cave, God care and our likeness to God have existed all the way back—to the ancient Hebrews, and Phoenicians, to Homo sapiens and Neanderthals.

What is the image and likeness of God that we have carried within us from the dawn of creation? I don't have a precise answer to that question, but I want to suggest one possibility for this spiritual quality. And to do so I need to tell another story—not one involving Gibraltar 39,000 years ago, but one involving Mississippi 53 years ago. In fighting the Civil Rights movement, Ku Klux Klan members and others in Mississippi during the summer of 1964 burnt 20 black churches. Three volunteers (two white, one African American) working with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) visited the burned-out remains of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Neshoba County. While driving back to Meridian, Mississippi, they were pulled over by police, charged with speeding and taken to jail. They were held until 10 at night, told to get out of the county, and were never seen alive again.

It took more than a month for FBI agents to track down the burnt out remains of the CORE station wagon and, after getting a tip from an informant, to find where the bodies

of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner had been hastily buried. What is striking is that when Michael Schwerner was about to die, having been beaten, cursed, and humiliated, his attackers said they were going to kill him and asked what he thought of that. To which Schwerner gave a simple seven-word answer: “Sir, I know just how you feel.” He didn’t respond with hate; he didn’t beg for mercy. He offered the only thing he could—a sense of empathy, reaching out for a connection with his killers. “Sir, I know just how you feel.” We know about this final moment because when the murderers were later caught, two of them independently recalled Schwerner’s words, struck themselves by the power and grace of that man’s final words of empathy.²

Much in the human mind has not changed over the millennia. For thousands of years, we have sought out shelter from storms, whether in caves or in structures of wood and stone. We have built fires for warmth and safety. We’ve found comfortable stone ledges on which we’ve sat and empty walls on which we’ve carved or painted and left our marks. That is all just part of the legacy of being human and it is just as present today as it was 39,000 years ago. But something more exists within us. We can call it the spark of the divine. We can tap into the wisdom of Genesis and call it being made in the likeness and image of God. It is the ability to look outside ourselves to see another being—and to empathize, to identify with, to try to get inside their skin and mind and to say with wonder at our shared humanity “I know just how you feel.”

The fullness of God, as revealed in Christ Jesus, was seen in Christ’s love and empathy. It was there when Jesus healed the leper, the blind beggar, the woman with the flow of blood—all people whom others had stopped seeing. It was there when Jesus taught the crowd on the hillside and seeing that they were hungry found a way to feed them from a few loaves and fishes. It was there when the crucified Jesus chose for some of his final words, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.”

Love and empathy are not saccharin emotions to be superficially doled out when it suits us. They are part of our spiritual DNA, of being made in the likeness of God. Now more than ever it is important for us to remember this. Today we listen to some leaders and sadly to our president, and hear words spoken that if we called them “neanderthalic” would be an insult to Neanderthals. In our interconnected world, no one has the luxury to dismiss others in ways that are racist, xenophobic, and narcissistic. And we certainly do not have that right if we call ourselves children of God the Creator, followers of God’s Son, Jesus the Christ. If we hope to survive this political season or confront the challenges facing all of God’s children, we need to bear the image of God by being people of empathy—willing to look others in the eye, even those with whom we disagree and say, “I know just how you feel. We’re in this together.”

Ask yourself the question: What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God? Make sure your answer is the same whether you live in Wexford or Homewood, Sewickley or the South Side slopes—whether you live in Pennsylvania or Peru—whether you live now or back in the age of Neanderthals. We possess something God-given that is meant to sustain us. The ability to empathize, to connect heart to heart and to work for the common good is one answer to this question I posed. If we live into that

God-given gift, who knows, God may again see everything that has been made and say, Yes, indeed, it is very good.

AMEN

¹ Cf. article “Us & Them” by Jon Mooallem, *New York Times Magazine*, January 15, 2017.

² Civil Rights scholar Taylor Branch has written about Michael Schwerner and his final words; and more of this story can be found at “Freedom Summer” at pbs.org.