
The Bible! A Preview and an Overview!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year C

*“Behold,” says the Revelation to John, “the dwelling of God is with mortals!”
(The Revelation to John 21.3).*

That verse is from the next to the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, the “Book of Revelations” as some people inaccurately call it. Its correct title is “The Revelation to John,” and the book concludes a magnificent library of sixty-six different books and authors, a library which we obviously call the “Bible.” “The Bible,” then, is not really one book; it is sixty-six books. We actually ought to call “The Bible” “The Library!”

Next week, I will be the primary speaker at our Parish Retreat, and I am going to attempt a daring project. I am going to present the entire Bible, all sixty-six books, in the span of three hours. I am calling the presentation, “A Three Hour Tour,” modeled after the theme song of Gilligan’s Island! “A Three Hour Tour” of the complete Bible.

In today’s sermon, I want to give you a preview. None of us has time for a three hour sermon today, so I want to give you a preview and an overview, of the entire Bible. (I have already used two minutes!)

There are actually several short sentences that describe the summary of the Bible. One of the descriptions I like is, “The Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city.” Or, “The Bible is a description of humanity’s search for God.” Or, “The Bible is a story of God’s search for humanity.”

Here is how I describe the long arc of the biblical story: The Bible is our gradual realization, over time, of where God lives. “Where is God?” Where does God live? What is the dwelling place of God? The Bible can be explained as a progression, through history, of human experiences of the Holy. Here goes:

First, in Genesis of course, we hear that God placed humanity in the beautiful and fresh Garden of Eden. Upon our exile from that garden, and ever since, we have been searching for the Holy. We have been searching for God. And God has been asking the same question, too, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3.9).

With our vestigial memory of the garden and the natural fruits of the earth, humanity in the Bible often identified the Holy with natural phenomena like trees and rocks. There was an old shrine in a place called Shechem, where there were trees that the prophets called holy; they called the trees the oaks of Moreh (Genesis 12:6; see also Joshua 24:26 and Judges 9.6,37). It was under those oaks that Abraham had a vision of God. In another naturally wondrous place, Jacob slept upon a rock and had a dream. Jacob realized that God—the Holy—was in that natural place and he didn’t know it. Thus, he said, “this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house” (Genesis 28:22). In fact, the word, “Bethel” means “house of God.” Where is God? At Bethel! That stone was where God was!

Moses, too, had an experience of God on a rock, on a mountain. God delivered stone tablets to Moses there. Through Moses, God’s people began to identify God with word, with sacred word, the tablets of the law. The presence of God was in those tablets, in that word, in that law. As the people travelled, a container for the words—called an ark—was built. That law, the presence of God, became housed in the ark of the covenant. This ark (a rectangular ornate wooden box) became a sacred symbol, to be respected and protected.

Where is God? *That ark* was where God resided! And it moved, with God’s people, as they journeyed. Later, a transportable tent was constructed to contain the ark.

Then, scripture says, God's people were moved to make a permanent and stable place for the holy ark of the covenant. This would be the temple, a solid structure worthy of the Holy, established by David and then Solomon. "Where is God?" This *temple* was the very dwelling of God. All was beautiful and strong, though the prophets warned of social carelessness. Then, Babylon invaded. Horrors! That temple was tragically destroyed in 587 BC! Less than a century later, however, God's people wonderfully rebuilt a second temple.

Over five hundred years after that, Jesus of Nazareth appeared, claiming somehow that he was the presence of God. He said such things as "destroy this temple and I will raise it in three days." He was understood to be speaking of the temple of his body. Thus, he was teaching that he, Jesus himself, was the presence of the Holy. The Holy had appeared in the incarnation of a human being. "Where is God?" God was in that physical body of Christ.

When Jesus was killed and then resurrected, Saint Paul the Apostle took this image of the Body of Christ an even further step. It was not just in the body of Jesus of Nazareth that God resided. Paul explained that the church itself was now the Body of Christ! Where is God? The Holy is to be found in the very people of God!

Then, finally, this identification of the Holy with the people of God was made even more explicit in the last book of the bible, that strange Revelation to Saint John, which we heard read this very morning. (Yes, it is a strange book, but I like it: for one, it gives a vision of what we will be doing in heaven. We will be singing! We better get used to singing!)

Revelation 21:3 is one of the most fascinating verses of Scripture, occurring at the very end of the Bible. Where is God? "Behold," says the Revelation to John, "the dwelling of God is with mortals!" (Revelation 21.3). This is where God lives, with us and in us.

"For the Bible tells me so." So it is that we, humanity, have experienced the Holy in rocks and trees, in words and promises, in covenants and sacred boxes, in tents and temples, in holy people like Jesus of Nazareth, and even in the ordinary holy people all around us. That is the story of the Bible!

Of course, there are many other details in the Bible, wonderful details that you can hear about if you come to the parish retreat next weekend! Some of the details of human history are disturbing, like betrayal and violence, like tyrants and emperors, like ugly stupidity and selfishness. It is all there. The Bible story develops even through tough seasons: seasons of bad kings, childish oafs, tyrannical emperors. We have lived through bad kings before.

But the conclusion of the Bible is what we have heard today. "The dwelling of God is with people." When we are with people, when we share joy and suffering, when we trust and love people, even when we share death and life with people, we are with God. In people, we are finding God. We are finding the Holy. Behold, the dwelling of God is with us!

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip