

The Patriarchs

Romans 9:5

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

"Once upon a time there were three bears -- father bear, mother bear, and baby bear,..." You don't like that? Okay. "In olden days in a deep dark wood there once lived a little girl called Red Riding Hood." That is the language of fairy tales, isn't it? It doesn't give any facts that you can check up on. "Once upon a time...." Well, which time is "once"? Or "in olden days", how old were the olden days? We all understand that and we accept it. They weren't meant to be believed. They are just stories that a storyteller made up in his own mind, and they are not meant to be taken as historical. If you want to write a good fairy tale, that is one of the qualities it requires. It requires no facts that can be checked up on and proven untrue. Everything needs to be kept vague and general so that you can never compare it with any other historical facts to see if it really happened.

That is the atmosphere, honestly, of the Hindu scriptures. If you read the Hindu scriptures you find that they talk of a never-never land kind of atmosphere where gods and goddesses have arguments, disagreements, fights and love affairs. Five hundred of the hymns in the Rig Veda are addressed to the drunken god Indra, and yet there are no facts that you can check up on to see if these things really happened. They are, really, in the same category as fairy tales. They are told in the style of things that happen in some unreal world that no one has ever seen and no one can ever check or compare with the real world. Indeed, you might say that the Hindu scriptures are writings produced by very talented people who are desperately trying to find something on earth worth worshipping. Rarely do they rise above the level of talking about gods of fire and gods of earth and gods of monsoons and rain clouds. The Hindu scriptures give you very little feeling that they are concerned with anything that is historical at all.

It is the same with Islam. Even though Islam began 500 years later than Christianity, and therefore should be able to be documented very carefully, actually Islam has very little documentation either. Mohammed's life is filled with all kinds of mythical, miracle stories that are patently poor imitations of the miracles that are recounted in the New Testament. Even Mohammed's proclamation that God is one -- Allah -- is shot through with many inconsistencies and contradictions such as you get in the Hindu scriptures. When you face those religions and examine them, you face a world of fairy tale, a world of subjective visions and personal dreams that you can never check up on, and you feel it. It takes you to suspend your reason and good sense in order to try to believe the things that they say about the gods who rule the world.

Now loved ones, the Bible is absolutely different. This book is history. It is written in terms of history. It isn't written in terms of a never-never land. It is written in terms of this earth, in terms that can be checked, with facts that can be corroborated. That is one of the great differences between the revelation of our Creator that you get in this Bible and the revelations that are claimed for Hindu scriptures, Mohammedan scriptures, Buddhist scriptures, Confucius, or Zoroaster. When you look at the Bible it talks always in terms of history. For instance in Matthew 22:31. You'll see the language is absolutely contrasted with the language of the fairy tale. "And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?' He is not God of the dead, but of the living."

Jesus says, "Look, the God that I believe in and the God that has dealt with me, He is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." You and I talk about the things Jesus has said about our Creator every Sunday morning. Those things were said 2,000 years ago by Jesus. Jesus is saying to us, "Look back another 2,000 years before me. Look back to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the God who showed Himself to them. Examine him and compare him with the God who has shown himself to me." He is really saying, "Don't take my word on the things I have said about our Creator. Don't accept just my opinions. Check out the lives of historical men, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Compare them with the contemporary record that you get of a king like Hammurabi and make sure that the things really happened to them. Then compare those things that happened in their lives to the things that happened in my life, compare the actions our Creator did in my life with the actions he did in their lives, then decide for yourself what your God is like." Jesus never says, "Just trust me, trust my insight and the subjective vision that I had while I sat under the bow tree. Trust what I know is true." He doesn't! He says, "Examine my life. Examine my death and resurrection, then go back another 2,000 years and examine the mighty things that happened in the lives of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and decide for yourself what your Maker is like. Compare the facts against the facts."

That, loved ones, is the atmosphere of the Bible. Over a period of 4,000 years, God revealed Himself consistently as the same person through actions which He did in people's lives over thousands and thousands of years. That is why you get all the "begats" in there. You know those interminable genealogies that as kids we hated, "so-and-so begat so-and-so". I thought if anything proves the Bible is dumb that proves it. Why all those "begats"? If this were written by God, why would he bore us to tears with all the "begats". Of course, the point is obvious. God wanted us to know where the people came from that he had dealt with and that he had revealed himself to. He didn't want us dealing with these ephemeral kind of half-legend, half-myth personalities that suddenly popped into existence from nowhere and then disappeared to nowhere.

He wanted us to be able to check historically on the people to whom He revealed Himself. He wanted us to be able to tell who their father and mother was, where they lived and when they lived, what happened to them and to their sons and daughters. He wanted to ensure there was a continuous, unbroken chain of witnesses down through the centuries of people to whom He had revealed Himself, who would pass that information on to you and me today. That is the importance of those old genealogies. They are a vital part of the Bible because the Bible as opposed to all other scriptures says, "This is history. This was done in time and space. You can check on it." You can check whose father this man was and whose mother this man was. You can check where they lived. You can compare them with the contemporary records of that time with other nations and you can be sure that these things happened. That is why when you ask the question "Does God exist?" you may as well ask the question: "Do the Jews exist?" Jewish history is impossible if God did not do and say the things that the Jews say He did and said. You can't separate the two. The one depends on the other.

That is why Paul makes the point in the verse that we are studying today. Romans 9:5: "to them (Israelites or the Jews) belong the patriarchs." The patriarchs are particularly those three men: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In Latin "pater archus" means "ruling fathers"; the ruling fathers of the nation are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When we were children we learned "I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob," and it was almost a litany to us. It is important for you to see that those three are historical figures. You can trace their genealogy if you want to. You can trace that Abraham's father was Terah, Terah can trace his ancestry back to Shem and then back to Lamech, to Seth, to Noah and Adam.

I will give you some of the verses showing where Abraham came from. Some of us have the feeling

there was Adam in the beginning of the earth and suddenly these men popped into view. Actually you can trace their genealogy back down through the years. Genesis 11:26: "When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran," Terah was Abraham's father. Where did Terah come from? Look at Genesis 11:10: "These are the descendants of Shem." Terah was one of the descendants of Shem who was one of Noah's sons. If you want to trace Noah, turn to Genesis 5:28. You can do this more carefully at home, but I want to show you that it actually does work; there is a careful genealogy. "When Lamech had lived a hundred and eighty-two years, he became the father of a son, and called his name Noah." Lamech was the father of Noah. Then if you want to trace Lamech back you can trace him back to Seth, who was one of Adam's sons. You see what happened. Adam met God and experienced God in his life. Then he told that to his son Seth, and though Adam's other sons had nothing to do with God, Seth continued to deal with God. God acted in Seth's life. Then he told that to his son and to his son and to Lamech, who told it to Nahor who told it to Terah, who told it to Abraham, who told it to Isaac, who told it to Jacob. The information we have on our Creator has come down by word of mouth and by written tradition, flawlessly, in an unbroken line from the first man who ever lived. Not only was it passed on faithfully, but confirmed by the further experiences that they themselves had with our God.

Now that is one of the important things about the patriarchs. I don't know about all of you, but I just wouldn't believe this stuff if it hadn't strong historical background like this. I'm not going to go out on a limb because somebody says, "I feel a feeling that I feel I felt before" or "You ought to have a god that helps you through life." I believe if you can't make it through this life in some fashion, you are a poor creature. I believe this stuff because it is history, because there are facts to back it up. There is documentation that is far better than anything that is provided for the classics or for Caesar or Plato. Loved ones, that is one of the values of the patriarchs to us. The patriarchs like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob have ensured a continuous unbroken transmission of the actions and the words of our Creator, down through the centuries among thousands and millions of people. Of course it puts it in a completely different realm than the kind of revelation that you get through one man like Mohammed or Buddha, unsubstantiated by others and unchecked and uncheckable as far as the space-time factor is concerned. That is the first value of the patriarchs.

There is another value. It is this. God, through the patriarchs, was restoring to us the dream that He had for us originally. Here was the dream. Look at it in Genesis 3:8a. This is the dream that God originally had for us. "And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." That was God's dream. God meant us to live our lives in that kind of intimate, informal relationship with Him. God intended us to get up each morning on this earth and hear the sound of Him in our bedroom and know Him as a dear, close friend. He intended us to live off his love. You remember when you were very tiny, a noise in the dark would scare you? He never intended that you would be scared. He always intended that we would be close to him, that we would hear a noise and immediately know that it was under the control of the dear One who originated everything around us and we would be at complete rest and peace. That was how the lion would lie down with the lamb. There would be no fear throughout the whole creation. Of course there would be a great sense of our own value, because we would feel the Originator and the final authority in the whole universe loves me with all his heart. "I am more important than anybody else because I am important to him." We would feel absolutely safe. We would feel absolutely satisfied with the relationship that we had with him. That was God's plan.

You all know that the other sons of Adam, apart from Seth, rejected that plan and decided to live not off the Father-Creator's love, but off creation itself. There were two things that happened. One happened to the creation and one happened to us. The first thing happened to us. We lost the joy of

open friendship with our Maker. We lost the sense of fulfillment and satisfaction that that gave us. We tried in the exhilaration of physical intimacy or in the exhilaration of claustrophobic human confidences with other human beings, to substitute for that joy the ordinary happiness of human friendship. Instead of being able to love other people for themselves, we began to treasure them for what they could give to us. We lost the whole sense of security that He would supply every need of ours when we had it, and we instead had to start living off the world, trying to get from the world the food, shelter and clothing that we needed to keep ourselves secure.

What in fact happened was, we became huge, egotistic, getting, enjoying, domineering monsters who emptied this world to try to make up for the things that we should have got from our intimate relationship with our creator. Instead of living off the Father, we began to live off our own ability to manipulate the world and circumstances and people to provide us with the security and significance and happiness that we were meant to get from our God. The world, as a result, was perverted also. Our own personalities were tremendously perverted, but the world itself was turned upside down because we began to empty it; we began to rape it and to gouge it out, instead of filling it. Just as you see a seagull on the Santa Barbara coast dying covered with black slime from an oil spill, so you see the agony that the world began to experience as we started to try to get from it what we should get from our Creator alone.

So the world slid into the futility of earthquakes and mudslides and floods. God looked down and saw us, in all our misery, trying to get from a hostile world, a world that was meant to be our friend, what we should get from His love alone. He saw that we were beyond any kind of deliverance unless somehow He could get a group of people who would live the way He originally intended us to live, so that we in turn could begin to see it and catch on. That's what the patriarchal family was. God got a man, Noah, who did not look to the world but looked to God Himself, and God began to work with that man Noah, and with his descendants who became the patriarchal family. He began to get them to live the way He intended all of us to live. Loved ones, that is one of the other things that the patriarchs do for us. They bring home to us again the way we were meant to live with our God.

You are 18, or you have moved to a new location, or you have just got a new job, or your parents have just died. Something has happened that has ended a certain stage in your life. Now you are wondering how you should strike out. Maybe you have received some revelation this morning and you have seen, "My life is on the wrong track completely. How should I strike out? Which way should I go?" Our dear old society says, "Look in the want ads and get the one that offers the most money. Start there," or "Go to a vocational guidance counsellor and find what your particular strengths are and then that will show you how you should set about your future." Abraham shows us the way we were meant to do it. Hebrews 11:8: "By faith" (that is, faith in God, not in his own ability to manipulate people and circumstances or his faith in the world or society) "Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go." That is what you should do.

We are dumb! We will do anything but that. Loved ones, anything else is futile. There is only one being in this whole universe who knows why you are here and it is not your mom, it is not a vocational guidance counsellor, it is not the ACT test or the SAT test or any kind of test, There is one Being who knows why you were put on this earth. Get together with your God. I don't care if you have never prayed to Him. If you close your eyes and speak in faith He will start coming through to you. If you are not sure which way to strike out as far as a job is concerned or as far as a marriage is concerned, or a new stage in your life, first of all, get together with your Creator.

Get together with God and ask Him to show you which way to go, and don't expect the answer in a certain way. Don't expect writing in the sky or a dream or a vision. Accept the answer in whatever way He gives it to you. First of all declare to Him, "Lord, I'm going to depend on you for the guidance in my life. Anything that does not come from you is wasted time anyway; it is futility. Unless I'm doing what you put me here to do, I'm just passing my time. Lord God, I'm staying with you until I get from you why I am here." That is the first step. Isn't it foolishness when you think of all the spinning of wheels we do and all the actions that we go through day after day? Isn't it true, only a fraction of us have any sure confidence that what we are doing is really what we were put here to do? The first step is to get together with your God, your Creator.

Some of us have cars and children and wives and homes, but the car runs rough at times, the wife isn't all you hoped she would be, and the children have kind of let you down. Loved ones, Isaac had something to tell us. Isaac was in need of a wife, and Abraham his father sent his servant out to get a wife for Isaac. "...and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac." (Genesis 24:3) Rebekah turned out to be the wife. Isaac had never seen her before, but he received her as from God's hand. He received everything that came to him as from God's hand. It brought such contentment to him. He wasn't a fatalist in the sense that he believed in a blind impersonal fate. He believed in a dear, loving Father who worked all things according to the counsel of his will, and so Isaac received his wife as God's gift to him, and therefore he lived in continual contentment.

Now if you are always trying to wrest from the world what you need, then you are forever discontented, because you think, "I could have wrested more if I had tried harder." If you really run your life on the basis of manipulating people and circumstances and things to your advantage, then you are never contented, because you always think, "If I had been a little more clever I could get a little more out of this." Loved ones, the only place of contentment is the place of this dear patriarch Isaac, where everything that comes to you in your life you accept as from the Father's dear hand, and you thank Him for it and rest in it until He chooses to change it. It is a place of peace. It isn't fatalism. Fatalism is a belief in some blind impersonal force--this is faith in a dear loving Father whom you know loves you more than you can love yourself. Therefore everything that comes into your life has been strained through His fingers and filtered through His love. It is a place of contentment and reality that this patriarch Isaac took.

Maybe you are sitting there saying, "Look, I'm not buying that. I'm not going to trust this Creator for guidance. I'm going to make my own guidance and I'm not going to accept everything blindly by faith as from Him. I'm going to manipulate my circumstances, manipulate my friends, manipulate things to get the kind of life that I want to have." So Jacob did. Jacob even bluffed his own blind father into believing that he was the elder son. He put animal skins on his body to persuade Isaac that he was the older son in order to receive the blessing and the inheritance. It said that even though they were twins, Esau just got out of his mother's womb first, just and no more, because old Jacob was holding onto his heel. Jacob was called the supplanter. He was always trying to manipulate things. Even late in life when he was going to meet Esau and was afraid that Esau would kill him because he had stolen the birthright, he still was resorting to his own methods, sending presents ahead, hoping that this would gradually persuade Esau to soften his heart.

Then there came this strange experience that we read in Genesis 32:24: "And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day." The man, of course, was an angel from God wrestling with Jacob's determination to live by his own wits and his own natural strength, by

his own faith in his abilities to manipulate the world as he wanted it. Verse 31: "The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his thigh." From that moment on in his life Jacob had one arm around God and he limped. He couldn't walk on his own two feet because he didn't walk on his own two feet. He walked on just one of his feet and he had his arm around God. That is the way he lived his life. At last he came to the end of his manipulating and his supplanting and his bluffing and his lying and his deceiving. His life came into rest.

Loved ones, unless you allow that natural strength of yours that wants to manipulate the world to your advantage, unless you allow that to be crucified with Jesus, as Jacob did, you will never come into the life that your Creator has for you. If you are like I have been, you are just a manipulator. You know there is no rest in it. One of the reasons we were so touched by Watergate was, we saw ourselves. You tell a lie and then you tell another lie to cover up that lie, and then you tell another lie to cover up that lie. Watergate touched so many of us because we run our own lives in that fashion. It is not God's will for us.

God's will is rest. God really does love you and He put you here for a definite purpose. He will bring that about if you concentrate on Him and if you put faith in Him and in His love for you instead of in your own ability to manipulate life the way you want it. I know it takes a crucifixion of self's right to live the way you want, but in that way lies peace and victory. I am sure that each of you are facing some things. Hardly a week goes by but I'm not facing something new that God has shown me where I am trying to get my way. Whatever that is, will you wrestle now and have done with it as Jacob did and begin to put your faith in your God, whom you will meet on that final day and give account to?