

## God Revealed: Sacred Conversations

*Amy Gohdes-Luhman*

Growing up in the Moravian Church, I remember my second grade Sunday School, Ms. Schumann, giving me my first Bible. Inside it she had inscribed the words from 2 Peter 3:18. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever. Amen. I thought I was too young to own something so valuable. And indeed I was. Absent-mindedly I laid some modeling clay on top of it and it made a mark on the cover that remains to this day. I felt so bad. To the best of my knowledge, outside of the modeling clay, I have never made a single mark in this first Bible. I have treated it as an object of holiness. The second and third Bibles have worn their mark of holiness a bit differently. There is hardly a page that does not have something written on it. I still think of the Bible as something holy, and I mark it as if my life depends on it.

I have been asked to write about Old Testament exegesis or interpretation. But before doing so, I think it might be helpful to say something about how I understand that Bible to be holy. Do I believe that the Bible was put together by scribes in a trance taking dictation from God? No. That is not how the Bible came

together. But is this Bible the revelation of God? Yes it is.

We tend to think that human words are not good enough to be from God. The Bible loses value if we say that humans wrote it. It does not have authority unless God wrote it. But if you think about it, how do we know God best? In human form. In the form of Jesus Christ. We know God incarnationally, as the divine become human, the Word made flesh. And so is this not how it is with the Bible? Isn't it right to think of the Bible as the word made "fully human?"

The revelation of the Bible is a sacred conversation: humans describing in a fully human way, with all our particularities, what has been revealed by the Holy Spirit, by the Divine. The apostle Paul is knocked off his horse by a bright blinding light, and he hears the voice of Jesus. This is his experience of the Holy, and he writes it down in his letters to the churches. By the authority of this experience, people listen to him and churches are created and sustained.

But not everyone listens to just Paul, we have the gospel of John, three letters of John, the book of Revelation — produced by a different

*The Rev. Dr. Amy Gohdes-Luhman has a PhD in Old Testament from Garret Evangelical Seminary and is pastor of Main Street Moravian Church in Northfield, Minnesota. She also teaches at St. Olaf College in Northfield.*

set of Christians who found their authority, not in Paul's teachings, but in the writings and understandings of John. We have the testimonies of both. And because our Bible includes both we wrestle with both.

The Bible does not have to meet my standards of truth; I have to meet its standards of truth by way of the stories put together by humans in search of God's face. Like Moses, I beg to see God. God granted Moses' plea to see him, but only with a glimpse at his back as he passed by. And God grants my plea with the Bible showing me a glimpse of God from behind me, what has already happened. I get a glimpse of God by way of the Scripture, the collected stories of those people of God who like me wanted so desperately to see and know the Lord.

It is with this ardent longing that I turn to the Scriptures and apply various methods of interpretations to reach a level of understanding of the Word made flesh. Knowing that all interpretations are partial (we see only dimly) and realizing that there is always a real potential for seeing only what I want to see and hear in the text, I try to guard against reading meaning into a text by employing a blend of historical critical methods and rhetorical critical methods.<sup>1</sup>

The historical critical methods force me to admit that the text was written long ago in a culture far removed from my own. Using these methods I attempt to determine when a passage was written, by what kind of speaker and what sort of audience. What were the cultural norms of the day and what is the underlying thought process that would call forth such a text and cause an ancient community to hold it sacred?

Rhetorical critical methods allow me to deal with the words on the page in a thoughtful and careful manner. Using these methods I seek to discover why a certain word was used instead of another, what is the rhetorical power of the text, was it persuasive for the ancient audience and if so, how?

As a pastor, it is from this point that I would then write my sermon. After identifying the rhetorical pull and direction of the ancient text, I try to recreate that same pull and direction in my message, thus allowing the Word of God to come alive in the present worshipping community.

After applying these methods of interpretation I collect my findings in a form that suits the audience and rhetorical situation for which I am speaking. A sermon for a worshipping community, a question and answer session for a Bible-study, an essay for a publication, a lecture (or lecture series) for a teaching setting, a program for a youth gathering, a story or object lesson for a children's sermon and so on.

Below is an essay which follows material I prepared for the Groenfeldt Lectures given at Sturgeon Bay in 2005 entitled, "God of the Old Testament: Searching for An Ancient Witness to the Moravian Way". In almost every rhetorical situation mentioned above, teaching and learning are central. For me the use of story is critical in that process. And so you will see that story-telling is more often than not woven into my elucidation of a text or biblical concept.

In the Groenfeldt Lectures I sought various Hebrew concepts that I could pair with identified virtues in the modern Moravian church. The following is the pairing of creation (Hebrew

concept) with sacrifice and surrender (Moravian virtue).

### **Sacrifice and Surrender: Br'**

Sacrifice/surrender and creation. How is God's act of creating a surrender or a sacrifice on his part? The Psalmist says:

When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet. (Psalm 8:3-6)

My middle child is an artist, a creator. She is also a middle child and is protective of her stuff. She has terror on every side — a younger and an older sibling who might take from her that which she has created. A most prized possession this summer was a large dishwasher box that she had made into a small house. God protect the neighbor or sibling who thought wrongly and went into the house without the permission from the creator.

I take it as surrender on God's part, a sacrifice of power, that we are allowed in this house. This house we call the created world. I can imagine there may have been a bit of a pause between Genesis 1:25 and 1:26.

God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind...and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good... [PAUSE] ... Then

God said, "Let us make human kind in our image...

And some days I think God wonders if he should not have rested right then and there. He certainly has that thought right before the big flood. But God keeps creating, AND CREATES US. *Bara'*: the term is used 48 times in the biblical text. 11 times in Genesis, 21 times in Isaiah. And of the 11 times in Genesis the concentration is in Genesis 1 five times and three of those times that it is used appear in a single verse: Genesis 1:27.

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. Create Create Create. Of all the times this verb, *bara'* is used it is always only a divine act. Only God creates, human make things, fashion things, build things, shape things, God does all that too, but only God creates.

And so why did God create us? "To glorify him and enjoy him forever." (Moravian catechism — of all 72 questions I memorized this is the one I still remember).

And it is true and correct as our response. But why and how are we the pinnacle, as Von Rad says: "the high point and the goal" toward which God's creating work has pointed?<sup>2</sup> And how is this a sacrifice or an act of surrender on God's part?

I think the answer lies in two words that appear in this section and again in Genesis 5:1-3 and Genesis 9:6. Image and likeness or *selem* and *demuth*.

Genesis 1:26: Then God said, let us make humankind in our image (*selem*), according to our likeness (*demuth*)...and

Genesis 5:1-3: When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of god (*demuth*). Male and female he created (*bara*’) them and he blessed them and named them humankind, when they were created (*bara*’). When Adam had lived 130 years, he became the father of a son in his likeness (*demuth*), according to his image (*selem*).

Genesis 9:6 for in his own image (*selem*) God made humankind.

One notices something in these passages. This image/likeness concept is non-negotiable. We can not get rid of it. We are created with it, which is God’s act. We cannot un-create or be rid of the image in which we are created. The second and third use of this triad (create, likeness and image) is related after the first sin; the first named sin being that of Cain’s murder of Abel. Even after we murder each other out of jealousy and self-concern we are still affirmed as being created in the image and likeness of God. Even after every inclination of our heart turns toward evil, even after the great flood, we are still affirmed as that creation which is created in the image of God.

So what does that mean? What does it mean to be created in God’s image? And how is that a surrender or a sacrifice on the part of God?

The two words *selem* and *demuth* are not synonymous though they are closely related. *Selem* probably did mean a physical likeness. It is a term used for idols or hand-made gods, things that are produced to look like something else. There is no doubt that the writers of the OT thought God looked like a man: the face of God (Psl 42:2, Gen 33:10), the hand of God (Gen

9:2), the feet of God (Exodus 24:10)...and so in some sense the ancient writer did mean we look like God. But the second term is less concrete and more abstract: *demuth* is used in reference to similarities other than visual ones.

What are those similarities that are not visual? I believe they are similarities in function tied to the command that follows our creation:

God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air...

Have dominion over... as God has dominion over all of creation, so do we. What? Von Rad says: “Just as powerful earthly kings to indicate their dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of the empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God’s image as God’s sovereign emblem... He is really only God’s representative...”<sup>3</sup>

I have a small problem with Von Rad’s analysis. We are not made of stone, metal or wood. So we can not be placed or erected...our act of representation is laden with danger — the danger of messing it up!

I also have a problem with Von Rad saying we are ONLY God’s representative...Only! One would think that is quite a job description. We have been commanded to act as God’s representative and we have been given the constitution and ability to do so. We have been created for this. Do not misunderstand me: We are not little gods nor are we dolls with rings in the back of our necks that make us move and speak.

We are given a power and a function to act as God's representatives on earth. And it is in this pinnacle act of God's creation, that I think God surrendered something. He surrendered a certain amount of control.

One may not be as comfortable with this idea. God is Omni: omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, all knowing, all powerful...all controlling? I am not so sure. God surrendered something in our createdness as God's representatives on this earth. Our God sacrificed in the act of *bara'*, in creating a creature that was like him with a will and volition of its own, God surrendered power to his creature, the power of dominion over the earth.

The Psalmist feels the weight of this sacrifice...*What are mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God...and given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet...(Psalm 8:4)*

I would like to think I am not responsible for this world — I know I am not in control of it. I would like to think that I am indeed not my brother's keeper or a tiller of this earth. But I am. We are. There is no way around it. We are *selem* and *demuth*, the image and likeness of God. And that has never been rescinded or broken, Genesis makes it very clear that this element of our created state follows us whether we murder or fill the world with wickedness. We still have the function of God's representative on this earth.

It may be easier to think that God is fully in charge and all the mess we make will be cleaned up in the end by a great housekeeping God. I would like to think I am not responsible for

this world. But God did surrender and sacrifice that which he made that which he could see was good, to us...to us.

Unlike Josie's cardboard play house, we are allowed in and not only that we have been asked to keep it good. God surrenders like that.

God surrenders in *bara'*.

### (Endnotes)

1 For two texts that I use as foundational for gaining historical critical insights, see Norma K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1977). In addition to these, I use the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* and numerous articles that can be found in the ATLA religious data base. For a rhetorical perspective I utilize various articles and books that focus on particular passages or books of the Bible.

2 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (The Old Testament Library Series; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 57.

3 Ibid, 60.