

# Prepare A Place

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren  
Sermon for Sunday, January 11, 2009 Genesis 1:1-13; 24-26

As many of you know, I am not exactly “Mr. Fix-It.” Nonetheless, I found myself a couple weeks ago helping my father-in-law put together a new computer desk for his office. It was one of those kits you get these days, with the parts all labeled, a book of instructions and the hardware in little plastic bags. In this particular case, there were over twenty major parts, about a dozen separate bags of different kinds of nuts, bolts, screws and dowels, and the books of instructions was almost 40 pages long. I’m sure someone with skills could have had the whole thing put together in an hour, but after two hours we were only a quarter of the way along.

My wife is actually much better at this kind of thing than I am. In fact, as I recall, it was she who put together the crib we got shortly after we moved into the parsonage right after I graduated from seminary. There I was, 27 years old with a graduate degree, and she was just 20 and 7 or 8 months pregnant, but she took charge and made sense of all the strange diagrams. I stood by and tried to make myself useful by handing her the right wrench or screw driver.

Working on my father-in-law’s computer desk took me back to those wonderful days, twenty-two and a half years ago, as we waited for our first child to be born. I remember the excitement and the anxiety, and the thrill of getting ready, putting up wall paper and matching curtains, building the crib, assembling the basic supplies. With great love and great care, we prepared a place for someone special. The scripture we read this morning, from the first chapter of the book of Genesis, has been the subject of intense interest and debate through the centuries, and especially in the last century. Skeptics, scientists, theologians and fundamentalists have argued over how much or how well it describes the “facts” concerning the origin of the planet and various species. But often lost in this debate are other possible ways of reading and understanding the text.

For instance, it can be read (and throughout history, has often been read) less as a kind of primitive scientific description of how the world began and more as a way of describing who God is and what our relationship with God is supposed to be like. Some have noted in these verses the creativity and power of God, and that is certainly there. God creates order out of chaos, makes a world that is full of variety and yet order. God creates merely by speech – “Let there be . . . “ God says, and suddenly it is as God says.

God is creative. God likes variety. God establishes order and overcomes chaos. God is powerful. Genesis 1 tells us all this, but it tells us something more, something easy to overlook. Genesis 1 tells us that the whole purpose behind the creation of a world – a wondrous, various, yet orderly world – was to prepare a place for humanity to dwell and thrive. In creation, God is not merely an artist showing off her skills, or king demonstrating his authority and power. God is primarily a host practicing hospitality, creating a place for us to be and to be well. Genesis 1 describes and celebrates the hospitality of God. It declares that God is the One who prepares a place for us, whose intention it was that the world should be a place where all people can live and thrive. This way of understanding creation and of understanding God was taken for granted by the descendants of Abraham, the people of Judah and Israel, and others in the region as well. And because God practiced hospitality, God's people were expected to practice hospitality. We see plenty of evidence for this in the law of the Old Testament, which describes what was expected of people when strangers were in need of food and shelter. But we hear of this even in the psalms, the hymns of ancient Israel. Take the most famous psalm, for example, Psalm 23. It says, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil."

These are two of the five traditional acts or gifts of hospitality expected in ancient Israel and surrounding countries. When welcoming a guest, a host was expected to first, offer a drink of water; second, wash the feet of the guest; third greet the guest with a kiss of peace; fourth, anoint the head of the guest with aromatic oil; and fifth, offer the guest something to eat. So in the 23rd psalm, as in the first chapter of Genesis, God is described as one who practices hospitality, one who prepares a place for us.

Indeed, in the psalm it is not only hospitality but refuge that God offers. Again, according to the customs of the ancient near east, if someone was being pursued by enemies, and came to your camp, you would have to welcome them, and you would have to keep them for two nights and a day. The enemy would have to wait outside the circle cast by the firelight of your fire. Imagine that.

An enemy would have to be patiently waiting. In the midst of waiting, perhaps anger and rage would turn to frustration. Perhaps frustration would change into tiredness. As the enemy waited outside the circle of firelight, there would be time for reflection and even a change of heart. And maybe the enemy could become a friend, and be welcomed to dinner. So one purpose of hospitality was to promote reconciliation and

to discourage violence.

Ordinary homes no longer function in this way, but places of worship often do. That is why they are sometimes called “sanctuaries.” In a sanctuary, one is safe. One’s enemies may not enter to do you harm. One is protected, not by weapons or threats of violence, but by nature of the place. A sanctuary is a place of holy hospitality.

Or at least it is supposed to be. Sometimes it is not. In many congregations, the great tradition of hospitality has been neglected and forgotten. Whereas Jesus got in trouble for welcoming people of all kinds, and making them feel at home in his presence, many of his followers seem more fearful than friendly when it comes to the strangers we meet. And churches, meant to be welcoming places, become places where we seek to be surrounded only by familiar faces while we practice the old, familiar ways.

Fred Craddock tells a story of a church that lost track of the importance of hospitality. Sadly, it was a church he once served, early in his ministry. It was located in the hills of eastern Tennessee. Years later, Fred returned to that church. He brought his wife, Nettie, along for the ride — for she had never seen it.

As the two of them drove to the little town, Fred reminisced about a time of controversy in that church. The nearby Oak Ridge National Laboratory was expanding, and new families were moving into the area. Fred, the young pastor, urged the people of this beautiful, little white-frame church to call on the newcomers, to invite them to join them. “They wouldn’t fit in here,” was the curt reply.

A week later, there was a congregational meeting. “I move,” said one of the longtime members, “that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county.” The motion passed, over the pastor’s objections.

When Fred and Nettie pulled up to the old church building, years later, it looked to be a busy place, much busier than he remembered. In his words: “The parking lot was full — motorcycles and trucks and cars packed in there. And out front, a great big sign: ‘Barbecue, all you can eat.’ It’s a restaurant, so we went inside. The pews are against a wall. They have electric lights now, and the organ pushed over into the corner. There are all these aluminum and plastic tables, and people sitting there eating barbecued pork and chicken and ribs — all kinds of people, surely many of whom had no ties to the county. I said to Nettie, ‘It’s a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise these people couldn’t

be in here.” (Craddock Stories, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001, 29.) Hospitality is hard work, but it is also a high calling. It is risky and costly, but in it there is also great opportunity and potential. Even God in creation – the original act of hospitality – found that not everything worked out exactly as God had planned or intended. You might say that God had a little trouble with his “guests,” Adam and Eve, when they decided to break the one and only rule of the house.

There were serious consequences, but God did not decide hospitality was a mistake or not worth the trouble. Instead, God went on to call a people to practice hospitality, to offer refuge, to prepare places of welcome for others. In this time, we are some of those people, and the work of hospitality is our work. I’ll be saying more about it next week, Lord willing. But between now and then I ask you to ponder what it would mean for you to practice hospitality. In fact, I ask you to actually practice it, at least in some small way. As a way of showing your gratitude to God who made a place for you, make room in your life for someone who needs a “place.” It might be as dramatic as inviting someone to stay in your home, but it could also be as simple as making time to listen to someone who needs to talk, or sharing a meal with someone who is lonely, or giving a ride to someone who needs transportation. Prepare a place, make room, practice hospitality.

It is the work of God. It is the work of God’s people.  
Amen.