

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

April 30, 2023

## ***“Write Your Life”***

*Genesis 1:1-3a, Job 1, Rev. 14:13, II Corinthians 3:2-3, Colossians 3:12-17*

### **George C. Anderson**

In March, I flunked time management. It did not make any sense for me to go to an overnight conference in Bluefield, West Virginia. Only a week before, I would have returned from a ten-day study trip to Israel. The Bluefield conference was on a Friday and a Saturday, and at 4:15 am on the following Sunday, Suzanne Fischer was to pick me up from my house so we could catch a flight to the Dominican Republic for the dedication of the hospital this church helped build. The flight didn't leave till 6:00 am but that morning Suzanne was like her father, Bob, who used to lead our Dominican mission trips: ***“If you're not ridiculously early, you're inexcusably late.”***

(I'm not complaining. I'm absent-minded. That I could get in and out of the country with wallet, passport and a gift for Millie was largely due to Suzanne).

So, why squeeze in a conference to Bluefield, West Virginia between those international trips?

- It was not a preachers' conference; it was a writer's conference.
- It was a Christian conference, but it was not a church conference.
- It had good speakers lined up like Miraslov Volf, Esau McCauley, Catherine Patterson and Hannah Anderson, but I was going alone and wouldn't know many others attending (Turns out, I didn't know *anyone* attending).
- With the nearest airport serving Bluefield being the one that sits in Roanoke, Virginia, it was a long and windy drive to get there and back.



I think it that the conference didn't make immediate sense is what made sense to me. I was intrigued about:

- being with writers talking about writing at a conference that was faith-based but not church-based,
- at an economically devastated city that is hard to get to, but which 400 people were going to go through the trouble of getting to—
- a conference organized by a Pentecostal minister who invited speakers ranging from mainline seminary professors to children's authors, to podcast celebrities.
- a conference that would take more time away from my family, but one which my wife thought I would enjoy attending.

I wanted to make sense of a conference that made no sense, and so I went.

I'm glad I did. I hope to go again next year and maybe one or two of you who love writing might want to go with me, so I won't be having dinner alone at The Vault downtown. It was exhilarating to be at a conference filled with people ranging from Pentecostals to liberal academics, from novelists to bloggers, from church people to the Spiritual-but-not-Religious, all of whom who, for one blessed weekend, did not care or talk about ideological differences or denominational issues, but just wanted to explore how to find words to give voice to The Word that they have heard in their lives and are trying to understand.

That's what my sermon is about today. I want us to consider the Word. Throughout the Bible—the book we have called *The Word of God*—this idea that God is encountered in The Word, in words, in writing... keeps coming up over and over again.

We had one example in our Affirmation of Faith from the beginning of John's Gospel. Let's hear from others.

Genesis 1:1-3a:

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup>the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>Then God said, "Let there be..."

Revelation 14:13:

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them."

Elsewhere it says in Revelation, it is said that our lives will be written in the Book of Life.

A third passage is not listed in your bulletin. It is from II Corinthians 3 when Paul says,



<sup>2</sup>You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all, <sup>3</sup>and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are human hearts

I chose the passage from Colossians because it suggests and answer to the question, “If our lives are to be letters, what should be written?”

Colossians 3:12-17:

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup>Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup>Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup>And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup>Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. <sup>17</sup>And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

**The Word of the Lord!** (Thanks be to God!)

I just read four passages. Maybe, I should have said, “The Words of the Lord?”

No, I shouldn’t have, for the Bible speaks of a Word beneath the words, the vocal cords of God we sometimes say is the Holy Spirit speaking. We mean something different by this Word of God from what it is we are saying when we call the Bible the Word of God. The Word of God of which the Bible speaks is not some kind of fixed thing that can be captured on paper, memorized, and repeated. It speaks of a Word that is dynamic, living—something that can be pointed to by words but cannot be captured by them. It speaks of a Word still being spoken; a story still being told.

When Millie and I lived in Kingsport, we would attend the storytelling festival in Jonesboro TN. There would be six huge tents out in fields, each tent covering a stage and hundreds of chairs. You’d think this was overkill, but thousands of people went to this festival. Millie and I would have to rush from one tent to the other in the hopes we could find chairs under the tent and not outside and in the sun.

- On one stage would be Donald Davis telling stories from his childhood such as when Leana and Lucy Leatherwood would clog up the party line with their gossip.
- When Davis was done, we would rush to get to another stage where Ed Stivender would tell about growing up Catholic and asking us if we could tell (and yes, when he talked about as a boy confessing just enough sins to satisfy the priest and get through confession, *we could tell*).
- When Stivender was done, we would rush to hear Ray Hicks tell Jack Tales with a thick Appalachian dialect that we struggled to understand.



Hear chapter 1 of Genesis and it is almost as if Genesis is a storyteller who has just walked out on stage. Genesis introduces itself by saying it is going to tell the story of how “[God created the heavens and the earth.](#)” Then, Genesis begins, and it turns out that the story is about how God creates the world *by telling a story*.

“And God said, ‘Let there be...’” As God speaks, things happen. That is how it is with good storytellers. As they talk, a world is created in imagination. As God talks, a world happens.

- Light is separated from darkness,
  - water from land,
- stars are placed in the sky,
- creatures are made which
  - swim,
  - crawl,
  - and fly,
- and then human beings are made in God’s own image.

God speaks the universe into being. *Creation is the story God is telling.*

How can we possibly think that God’s Word can be fixed, that it can be captured on paper, memorized and stored away, when

- the universe keeps to this day expanding as God keeps telling,
- when life is what God keeps writing?

If God stops telling, the world stops happening. The past is finished and gone, and nothing can become new. So, God keeps speaking and creation keeps happening.

Thankfully, the story of creation is still being told. But even as the story of creation is being told, there are stories within the story. You might call some of them, sequels.

Millie and I are watching a sequel on TV right now. We watched the series, *Schmigadoon* a year or two ago, and now we are watching Season Two called *Schmicago*. *Schmicago* is a sequel in that it is just like *Schmigadoon*. Both series have a couple trapped in a land of musicals. But the two series are different. In *Schmigadoon*, they are trapped in a land where the musicals are light and happy, like *Brigadoon*, *Music Man*, and *Oklahoma*. In *Schmicago*, they are trapped in a land where the musicals are dark and full of angst; like *Chigago*, *Sweeny Todd*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

John’s Gospel presents a sequel to the Genesis, chapter 1 where God speaks creation into existence. John also tells a story about *The Word*, about God speaking and something happening. This time though, the story is not about Creation but about redemption. It is not the bright story of stars being placed in the sky and animals roaming the earth, but about a deep wound in humanity needing to be healed.

It is not like God didn’t do a good job the first time. Creation is not broken. It is fine. Whether the human race survives or not is of no concern to energy and matter, to light and to dark. The stars will sit and planets spin after we are gone as they did before. What is broken is not about physics, it is about the unseen kingdom of God where what is moral and ethical matters. We



are broken as a people, and a story of history needs to be told *within* the story of creation. The rest of the Old Testament is about that story of brokenness and healing, but the New Testament is a sequel that retells the story of Genesis 1 in a way that makes those who hear it see life in a whole new way. In John's sequel, the focus is not on creation but on human life and human community.

- “[In the beginning was the Word,](#)” the Gospel begins.
- “[The Word was with God.](#)”
  - That is, this Word is a story God has to tell.
- “[And the Word \*was\* God!](#)”,
  - which is to say that the story God has to tell is personal and true.

This time, the story is about God *writing a life*. “[The Word became flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth.](#)”

And then the rest of John's Gospel tells how God writes a life among us. It presents Jesus as God's pen. As Jesus

- teaches about God's love,
- shows compassion to and stands up for those who are outcasts,
- as he creates community,
- as he lives true to what it means to follow God
  - even when it comes at the cost of his life,
- and then as the story ends with a new beginning with the discovery of the empty tomb, God is writing a life.

The story of the creation of the universe helps us understand our biological place in the universe of matter and energy, but the Word that is fleshed out in Jesus is about how God wants us to live in this world whether we thrive and struggle, or we live or die. It's the story that you cannot find in a rock because it is a Word that comes to us from outside creation. It is a Word that tells you that it matters how we live and how we treat others. The wrongs we do, they wound. Not the universe, but wound God's heart by wounding the community that God loves. And it matters what we do to try to repair what we harm, heal what we have wounded.

If you ask a decent storyteller why her stories are told, it might simply be to entertain us, or even to earn a living. But if you ask what I think are really great storytellers why their stories are told, they would say something like this: “[I want those who hear my stories to find their own stories in mine.](#)” That is what Paul is saying about the story God continues to tell in the living Jesus. He wants us to find our story in the story of redemption God is telling. Really, he wants Jesus' story in some way to be told in the way we use our lives as pens in the way we live.

Revelation has a more dramatic way of putting this when it says that when we die, our works do follow us, which is to say that our lives are remembered, and they are entered into the Book of Life. You can hear that as a Judgement text, but I think it is more a simple statement of the truth that how we live makes a witness whether we like it or now. “How we live, matters.”



I guess the question is, “[Will our lives be sequels?](#)” Will our lives be used by God as pens to write stories that somehow retell the story God is telling in Jesus?

That’s something we all need to think about because what that means is different for each of us.

I’ll say this though. The Bible knows that so much of our lives are beyond our control. Chance and opportunity play big roles in just how much a difference anyone can make. That’s why God makes few demands of slaves and great demands of Pharaohs. That’s why it matters in the Bible more how the healthy treat the sick, the rich treat the poor, the managers treat their workers. That’s why more is expected of those with privilege, power, and opportunity than those who have more reason to do what needs to be done to survive and feed themselves and their families.

But the question that is asked of all of us, at whatever level we are capable of answering, is “what will be the story we tell in life?” “Will the Word be heard through who we are and how we live, or not?” It is not a question about how successful you are, even in being able to do good in the world. Chance, opportunity, and freedoms play huge roles in how much good we are allowed to do. The question is really about how, within what is possible for us, we are going to live. What witness we make as we write the chapter that is our life.

Again, we will all need to answer that question in individual ways. But Paul provides a wonderful general answer in II Corinthians. You would do well to go back and read the passage, but I hear Paul saying that you should try to live in a way that respects the dignity of each other. If there are problems—if there are divisions between us—we need to try to work it out in the way Jesus would work it out. That is, let forgiveness be a part of the way you work it out. Above everything else, live according to the Law of Love and keep Christ’s peace in your hearts.

And then Paul says—and I’m not paraphrasing here—“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Again, become pens that write stories where the story of Jesus is re-told. Martin Luther famously said that Satan hates pens, that they write the story of redemption, because they erase the story he’s trying to tell.

