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 First Presbyterian Church of Athens
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The Old Testament in Twenty Minutes

Introduction to Scripture

Our Old Testament reading this morning will be the opening and closing verses of the Old Testament. Listen for God's word: *Gen 1:1-4a and Malachi 4:5-6.*

Our New Testament reading is from one of Paul's letters to his assistant, Timothy, giving him advice. When Paul refers to "sacred writings" and "scripture," he is referring to his and Timothy's Bible, that is, the Old Testament. Listen again for God's word: *2 Timothy 3:14-17.*

Sermon

Ordinarily the preacher is a photographer who focuses in on a single passage of scripture for a close look, as Bruce did recently for four Sundays with the 23rd Psalm. Today, however, I am going to attempt something entirely different. I am going to get out my wide-angle lens and endeavor to capture the entire Old Testament in a single sermon.ⁱ So often we just get snap shots. Today we'll get a panoramic photograph.

As a preface, let me state that the Old Testament is an incredibly complex document. It is really a library of documents or books (39 of them). It is the work of numerous authors and editors, sometimes multiple ones within a single book, representing different points of view, coming out of different historical and sociological and theological contexts. It contains different sorts of literature including stories and poetry, legal codes and worship liturgy, prophetic utterances and genealogies, to name a few. Indeed, it is a multi-layered, mixed-media, group-compiled collage. What holds it all together?

At its heart, the Old Testament is testimony. It's the testimony of a particular group of people about God. It's Israel's telling her experience of God. That experience is spoken through many different voices. Those voices display a sort of creative tension. On the one hand, God is experienced as the power that sustains creation and orders the life of community. On the other hand, God is experienced as the power that brings revolutionary possibility for change and transformation. Which is to say that the God who blesses and orders our lives is also the God who disrupts in order to make new. The verses we heard a moment ago book-ending the Old Testament illustrate just this: Genesis, beginning with an ordering God, and Malachi, ending with a threatening God. By the scriptures of the Old Testament, then, we are both comforted and disturbed.ⁱⁱ Some of what we read, I confess, is so disturbing that it cannot be reconciled with what's in the rest of scripture and must be taken with a very large grain of salt, like, for example, the laws which command stoning blasphemers, adulterers, gays, and rebellious children. But that's another sermon for another day.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew. The Jews divide it into three sections: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. In our Protestant Bibles, the books are the same, but the order is different.

We begin with Genesis. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are primeval and archetypal. They are stories which date to before recorded history, and they point to something bigger. They

tell us about persons named in them—Adam, Eve, Noah—but their real intent is to tell us about ourselves. They tell us about our creation in the image of God, our vocation as stewards of a good world, the universal struggle to resist temptation, the human bent toward violence and pride. We also learn from these stories about God. We learn that God is God of the whole world and desires his creation to live responsibly in it—an ordering and blessing God. Yet God is willing to flood the earth and start over when people don't live as God intended—a disturbing and transforming God.

From Genesis 12 onward, the Old Testament becomes the story of the Israelites and their unique relationship with God. God calls them to be his people and covenants to be their God. Beginning with the childless nomad couple, Abraham and Sarah, the first Jews, if you will, God promises them two things: 1) many descendants who will be a blessing to all the nations, and 2) a land of their own. In the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs--Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, and their families--we see that repeatedly God is faithful though God's promises meet multiple challenges like barrenness, lack of trust, family jealousy, famine, and finally slavery.

Indeed, in Egypt, where the descendants of Abraham and Sarah have become slaves, the first of God's promises of many descendants is fulfilled. But its very fulfillment is a threat to the most powerful empire of the day. Pharaoh is afraid of how numerous the Hebrew slaves have become and introduces a program of genocide. Thanks to the plucky and faithful actions of five women who stand up to the tyranny of Pharaoh and through a stuttering goat herder and fugitive named Moses (who happened to grow up in the Egyptian court), God rescued his people from bondage. The Exodus--that rescue--became a watershed event in the history of Israel. Part and parcel of the rescue was the gift at Mt. Sinai of the Ten Commandments and the law which ordered their new society. The Israelites never regarded the law as a heavy burden but understood it as based on God's love for them. Not coincidentally the first of the Ten Commandments begins with a reminder of God's love and goodness to them: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt where you were slaves...."ⁱⁱⁱ

After the Exodus, Israel spent forty years in the wilderness where God tested them and shaped their identity. Then they settled as a loose confederation of twelve tribes in the land God had promised to Abraham and Sarah. But the Canaanite gods and goddesses already worshiped there became a huge temptation to the Israelites. There were local heroes (or judges) like Deborah, Gideon, and Samson who encouraged resistance to such treason. But as time passed, loyalty to the God who had delivered them from slavery and covenanted with them became weaker and weaker.

Wanting to be like other nations, Israel begged God for a king, and so God granted their wish despite misgivings. The first king was Saul. The next were David and his son Solomon, under whom Israel's national fortunes reached their high point around 1000 BC. But the fragile union of the tribes unraveled. The kingdom was divided into two nations. Kings who were supposed to shepherd the people on God's behalf instead led them astray. God's people neglected the law which God had given them for their wellbeing. They worshiped idols. They disregarded justice. They lacked compassion for the poor. They focused on their own wealth and pleasure. Over and over God's spokespersons, the prophets, protested. They could see that Israel would come to ruination for rejecting God and ignoring God's law. From the courageous Elijah to the introspective Jeremiah, the great prophets critiqued the religious, social, economic, and political life of Israel, but with little effect.

In 722 BC, the northern kingdom collapsed. The ten northern tribes of Israel were forced to

relocate to other parts of the Assyrian empire where they were largely assimilated. One hundred thirty-five years later, the southern kingdom of Judah collapsed. The Babylonians destroyed the capital Jerusalem, decimated its temple, deposed the king, and deported its citizens, taking into exile the remaining two southern tribes. This was a huge defeat of immense proportions. Nevertheless, they understood it to be God's doing, a punishment for their apostasy. But that disturbing punishment that had upended their world held the seeds of blessing. Out of the disaster of the Exile, God wrought new life. While the people were living in Babylon, even in their disillusionment, they sought to preserve their national identity and refused to be assimilated. They set out to reassess the lessons of the past and had faith that God would not forget his earlier promises. Hope blossomed. Prophets from this era understood that there would be a new creation and a new exodus of an even greater scale than before. For the whole world would be the scene of God's renewed activity. Israel would be a "light to the nations." A future king would rule with righteousness and justice. This one anointed by God—literally *the messiah*—would redeem the world, thus coming full circle to the promise made to Abraham and Sarah that their descendants would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

After seventy years, God delivered the Israelites from exile in Babylon. They returned to their land. They rebuilt their temple and capital city. This is where the narrative of the Old Testament breaks off. Historically it's around the year 430 BC.

So far, we've covered roughly the first third and last third of the Old Testament—the first third running from Genesis through Nehemiah, which is the narrative arc of the history of Israel plus the last third running from Isaiah through Malachi, which are the prophetic books of social, economic, political, and religious critique by the prophets who lived during the reign of the kings, the Exile, and the return.

Now for the middle third of the Old Testament. The middle third of the Old Testament is composed of poetry and wisdom literature, what the Jews call the *Ketuvim*, or the Writings. As you flip through these books in the Bible you can see lots of white space on these pages as the editors have set the type as verse, not prose.

Here's a little mini lesson on Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poetry doesn't rhyme. It repeats. Typically, it starts with a statement. This is followed by a line which repeats what the line before has said but using synonyms or parallel images. For example, from Psalm 1:

"Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked," (*line 1*)

"Or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers." (*line 2*).

Sometimes, however, the second line contrasts with the first, saying the opposite, like this at the end of Psalm 1:

"For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous," (*line 1*)

"but the way of the wicked will perish." (*line 2*).

Hebrew poetry has a beauty and rhythm all its own.

The Writings or *Ketuvim* contain a different sort of testimony to God than what we have seen so far, where God is experienced through the realities of public life and public power—through history. This testimony is more personal and encompasses people's everyday experience as well as their worship life. Much of it is wisdom teaching. The book of Proverbs is a prime example. It contains pithy sayings like, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble."^{iv} These kinds of sayings arise from a keen observation of the way the world works, an observation that sees that deeds have consequences—consequences guaranteed by the Creator in the very fabric of creation. So, as you sow, so shall you reap.

But when we come to the book of Job, we get a counterbalance to this neat formula for life.

Sometimes you can sow righteousness and faithfulness and reap the short end of the stick. The book of Job wrestles with the problem of innocent suffering. It is a protest against the idea that suffering is always punishment for sin.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, we get the existential musings of a wealthy man at the end of his life. He recognizes the folly of all he has worked for but nevertheless advises the reader to keep on keeping on in faith.

In the Book of Psalms, a much beloved book, we find testimony to both the God who blesses life and to the God who seems at times remote and unresponsive, but who ultimately brings hope out of despair and newness out of life in the pits. The psalms are most remarkable in their honesty. They do not flinch from any emotion, be it glee or depression, anger or thanksgiving. Some of the psalms were used in communal worship, others in personal prayer, as still is the case today. Their location is in the middle of our Bible, in its heart, as it were. That reflects their importance in the heart of Israel's faith.

There are remaining two books I haven't commented on. Neither of them mentions God. For that reason, they almost didn't make the cut. They almost weren't included in the Bible. The Song of Songs comes at the end of the middle third of our Bibles. It's clearly an ode to romantic love and intimacy though the church has viewed it as an allegory of God's love for the church. The other book, Esther, is a short story set among the Jewish community in Persia some 100 years after the Exile. In it a Jewish orphan becomes the Persian queen. Together with her cousin, she rescues the Jews from a plot of genocide. Though God is not mentioned directly in the whole book of Esther, there is an underlying sense of God's providence at work in saving his people.

Okay, so that's a broad-brush sweep of the Old Testament, hitting just the highlights. While it was compiled centuries ago, it's scripture that is claimed by both the Jewish and Christian community. It was the scripture of Jesus and his disciples, and of the early church, and the church today. Though ancient, these texts have authority and relevance to us. The God to which the Old Testament testifies is the same God which we experience and worship. We too experience God as one who creates and orders life, keeps faith with us, delivers us, blesses us, and gives us good gifts. But we also experience God as one who challenges the status quo, who upsets our cherished visions, and calls us to give up our false gods and unjust ways. We know God as one who loves us enough to insist that we live in such a way that is wholesome for us and for others, too, who is working to transform us and the world. While we have the advantage of understanding this God more fully through the person of Jesus, it is the same God.

So, Israel's testimony is our testimony. Israel's story is our story. You know how when someone hands you a group photo, you always seek out yourself first? Well, in the panoramic photograph which is the Old Testament, we don't have to look too hard before we see ourselves all over this picture.

i. I owe inspiration for this sermon to Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014), pp. 23-29.

ii. Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, & Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 19.

iii. Exodus 20:2.

iv. Proverbs 11:2.