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Introduction to OLD PLACES, NEW FACES

Places have to do with geography. In the Bible we find God's people in many different places, both physically and spiritually, in their relationship to the Creator and Savior. We, like them, journey through many lands in our Christian walk. We move from chaos to order, from Ur to Canaan, and from obedience to disobedience. The geographical locations of Biblical characters can symbolically refer to places we find ourselves with respect to our faith. As we become more acquainted with our spiritual geography, we will better discern where God would have us go or what changes we need to make in order to serve Him better.

Old Places, New Faces seeks to make the stories and places of the Bible a reality in our lives today. It seeks to get at the relevant messages for today as found in the pages of the Scriptures. This study relates to the Bible as a book that speaks clearly about present realities through stories of the past. The Bible is not only intended to give the reader knowledge about events and people in the past, but through these events and people, inspire greater faith.

Old places from within the Bible can come alive with present significance to *new faces*—that is, us. May this be true for you as you use this study.

LESSON 1:

LIVING WITH CHAOS

Location: The Uncreated World

The first “old place” we will look at is the universe at its creation. The point of this study is to help us understand what these stories are telling us about our life and our God.

Most scholars believe the creation account was written to the exiled Hebrews in Babylonia. At the very least, it would have been a powerful message to them about God’s ability and desire to enter the world He made in order to bring order out of chaos.

The first chapter of Genesis was written not primarily as a history about the beginning of the universe, but instead, to remind the people that the Creator who brought light into the first darkness is the God who cares for us today. He wants to enter our darkness and troubles to bring us peace.

The creation account is intended to say more about present reality than about the past. This first chapter of the Bible introduces the main character of the story (God), and hints that what He did then, He will do again. He will enter our troubled world to bring us light, be concerned with what happens on the earth, and use His power to bring peace in the midst of turmoil.

This story is a sermon to those in exile and to all who are overwhelmed by the darkness and floodwaters of suffering. There is hope! God has not forgotten His world or His people, and will act to help them.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:**READ GENESIS 1:1—2:4**

1. Before God brought order and life to creation, two elements were present that caused chaos. What were they? (See Genesis 1:2)

2. How did God create the universe and bring order and life from chaos? (Genesis 1:3)

3. Do you think this story relates in any way to the present day or to our lives?

Many scholars think the first chapter of Genesis was written during the time of the Babylonian captivity (the exile) when the Israelites were taken to Babylonia as slaves. Their land and homes were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's invading army. Much of Jerusalem, including Solomon's beautiful temple, was destroyed.

4. What message of hope does this chapter offer to those captives who wondered where God was when they were overwhelmed by darkness in Babylonia?

The end of the book of Isaiah may also have been written during the period of Israel's exile in Babylonia. Read the following passages from Isaiah to see a sampling of this message:

___ Isaiah 42:5-6

___ Isaiah 43:1-5;

___ Isaiah 45:7-8, 12-13

___ Isaiah 51:12-16 and 60:1-2

5. What similarities do the above verses from Isaiah have with the first chapter of Genesis?

Throughout the Scriptures, personal or community troubles and crisis are often described with metaphors of darkness and flood-waters. Look at these two examples:

___ Job 17:11-16

___ Psalm 69:1-3, 15

6. What are those who are experiencing darkness and the flood-waters seeking from God?

7. Where is there darkness in your life?

Have you ever felt like your circumstances were like a flood of water that was overwhelming you?

Darkness is a part of every human life, at least at times. Suffering and troubles can sweep over us like floodwaters. But the creation story tells us that the God who brought light into the first darkness promises to bring light into ours. The God who tamed the cosmic waters in the beginning will tame the waters that now engulf us. God is still in the business of entering darkness through His mighty Word in order to bring light and hope to a troubled world. God continues to shout, "Let there be light!"

8. How might remembering God's work at creation help us as we face troubles in the present?

God can help us in our times of chaos and offer us strength to go on with courage. The first chapter of Genesis is a promise that He will also enter the darkness of today's world with His Word to create life and peace.

CLOSING:

Read Psalm 67 aloud.

Sing and/or read the words of the hymn, *Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me*.

PRAYER:

Sovereign Lord, darkness is a very real part of our lives. At times, floodwaters engulf us. Grief and sadness are often our companions. Yet, you are also our companion. Help us to understand that you will not let the flood swallow us up. You will not let the darkness overwhelm us. Fill us with hope, even at the worst of times, as we rest our thoughts on your loving kindness and grace. We pray in Jesus' name, AMEN.

LESSON 5:**LIVING WITH GRACE***Location: The Ark*

The key to the flood story is in Genesis 7:1. The “you” in the phrase “only you are righteous” is singular, referring to Noah. This means seven unrighteous people were saved from death even though they didn’t deserve it. The reason these seven were rescued is that they were family members of the one righteous man on earth and they had enough faith in him to accept his invitation to enter the ark.

This is a perfect example of our own spiritual journey. We are sinners like the seven and consequently face the punishment of death. Yet, we have a righteous man who invites us to salvation because of what He did with wood (a cross). Because of baptism and continued faith, we are a member of Jesus’ family, and as a result, have access to this salvation. Jesus invites each of us on board. We can accept His invitation by faith, a faith that God Himself creates in us by means of the Holy Spirit working through the Word that the church proclaims and preaches.

It is interesting to note that another name for a church sanctuary is “nave,” which in Latin means “ship.” This creates an image of sinners going to worship and entering the ark (like Noah’s family) at the righteous one’s (Jesus’s) invitation. It is essential that we enter the worship place with a clear understanding that we are there only because of the grace of God and His love for sinners.

The story of Noah’s ark helps us see that it is simply erroneous to think of the Old Testament as law and judgment and the New Testament as gospel and grace. The truth of the matter is that both the Old and New

Testaments contain law and gospel, judgment and grace. It is this Old Testament story that proclaims the New Testament truth that people are saved by grace through faith. As we read this story, it is difficult not to hear echoes from the future book of Romans, "God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were sinners, Christ died for us."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

READ GENESIS 6:5-7:1

1. What was the general disposition of humanity toward God at the time of Noah (Genesis 6:5, 11-12)?
2. What was God's judgment for such wide-spread violence and corruption (Genesis 6:7)?
3. According to Genesis 6:18, how many people were saved from the flood? Who were they?
4. How many of those on the ark were righteous and deserving of their salvation? (Hint: the "you" in Genesis 7:1 is singular in the Hebrew.)

5. Who do you identify with in the story: Noah or one of his passengers?

Think about it, and then read the following:

___Romans 3:10-12

___Romans 3:23

6. What are the consequences of our sin? In other words, what do we deserve (Romans 6:23a)?
7. Who is the Noah in our life, the righteous one who makes salvation possible for us in spite of our unworthiness (see Romans 5:9-10)?

READ PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11

8. What are the similarities between knowing Noah and “knowing Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:8)?
9. When God saved Noah’s family, how were grace and faith involved?
10. How are grace and faith involved in God saving us today?

READ 1 PETER 3:20-21

The ark of Noah's time is a good image for baptism, through which we escape the consequences of our sin. However, in the Large Catechism Luther states, "It does happen that we slip and fall out of the ship [here baptism is the ark]. If anybody does fall out, he should immediately head for the ship and cling to it until he can climb aboard again and sail on it as he has done before."

11. Does Luther say everyone who is baptized will forever remain saved?

12. How might one climb back onto the ark after "falling off?" That is, how can we regain the benefits Christ won at the cross and gave us in baptism when we fall away?

READ EPHESIANS 2:8-9

Noah invited people onto the ark in order that they might be saved. Those seven who trusted him escaped the flood and certain death even though they were sinners and deserved to die like everyone else. They had faith in Noah's words and were rescued in spite of their unworthiness.

What Noah did is an example of God's grace. God loves people even though they do not deserve it. Paul says that we, too, are saved by grace through faith. We have a righteous man (Jesus Christ) who invites us to escape what we deserve. Baptism is the vehicle by which He graciously puts us on board His ship, and repentance is the means by which we remain on board. Thanks be to God for His salvation!

CLOSING:

Read Psalm 103:8-18 together.

Sing and/or read the hymn, *Amazing Grace*.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for not dealing with us according to what we deserve. Thank you for your grace. Thank you for loving us and rescuing us from sin and death even though we are sinners. How sweet your precious grace is to us, Lord. AMEN.

LESSON 11:

LIVING WITH A REAL GOD

Location: Bethel and Peniel

Even though Jacob grew up with parents who were believers in the one true God, it seems he did not think of God as a living personality like his parents had. Without a doubt, Jacob had heard much about God from his parents and had taken part in various religious ceremonies and rituals that honored God. It seems from today's lesson, however, that he had not yet come to think of the Almighty in personal terms. He had not yet encountered the living God in a real way.

At Peniel, which means "the face of God," Jacob encounters God in a dynamic way for the first time in his life. This is shown by Jacob's surprise that God was so close and real, and by God's need to introduce Himself.

When God states that He is the God of Abraham and Isaac, it is obvious that Jacob's name has been omitted. Even though God had always been in the boy's life, Jacob had not yet conceived of Him as being real or personal, and had not yet deliberately begun to relate to or follow Him. In this encounter, Jacob tells God he will follow Him. He wants God to guide and protect him on his journey away from his family.

When young people grow up in the church, their experience is often similar to Jacob's. That is, they first learn the rituals their church practices and then acquire information and facts about God. Hopefully they will personalize their faith later on by shifting the object of that faith from information and rituals to the person of Jesus Christ.

One problem, however, is that many times young people grow into adulthood without maturing into the stage where they relate to God as a real, living being instead of simply relating to the church with its doctrine and rituals. As a result, their faith remains shallow and empty.

If this transference of faith from facts and rituals to the risen Lord Jesus fails to occur, there is a greater likelihood that the person will not find enough value or interest in the Christian faith to continue in it. But if a person encounters God as a personal, present companion and a helpful resource in difficult times, his faith will most likely develop into a rich and valuable treasure that gives direction and meaning to all other areas of his life.

This distinction might be similar to a marriage counselor who has accumulated a vast amount of information about male-female relationships and marriage. This person may have an extensive library containing most of the books ever written on the subject. Maybe she's even read every book twice.

However, suppose this counselor is not married and doesn't have a significant relationship with anyone of the opposite sex. By her own admission, she is lonely but too busy to develop an intimate relationship with anyone.

Of what value is the information the marriage counselor has acquired when she faces personal grief, difficulties in life, or sadness? None. But an intimate relationship with a spouse could be of great benefit in all of these circumstances. Books cannot touch a person with affectionate warmth. Information cannot show compassion. Facts cannot comfort one's grieving or share in one's joy. But living personalities can.

In the same way, knowing about God has limited benefits, while personally knowing God and His intimate presence is both life-giving and comforting.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:**READ GENESIS 28:10-22**

At Bethel, Jacob meets the real God. He is alone at night, surrounded by darkness. Jacob was surrounded by emotional and mental darkness as well. He is fleeing from his brother Esau, who wants to kill him (Genesis 27:41). It is at Bethel that he encounters the Almighty as he leaves everything that is dear to him behind.

1. At Bethel, how did God introduce himself (Genesis 28:13)? What seems to be missing?

This was apparently Jacob's first encounter with the living God. Up to this point, His "relationship with the Lord" may have only been a relationship with the stories that were told to him or information he had learned about God from his parents. Here Jacob begins to recognize that the God of his fathers is alive and active in human life.

2. How does Genesis 28:20-21 betray that this was a new experience for Jacob?
3. What is the difference between a religious faith that sees itself only as related to facts, stories, and information, and a faith that sees itself as a relationship to a living person?

4. What difference did Jacob's encounters with God probably make in his life as he faced dark or difficult situations later?
5. Examine your own faith. Do you think your faith is mainly a relationship with doctrines and information about God, a relationship with the living person Jesus, or a mixture of the two? If you grew up in the church, you began with a relationship to information told to you by others (as did Jacob). Our faith becomes stronger and alive when we encounter the living God through our own experience. Have you ever encountered God in a real way? If so, what did it do for your faith?

READ GENESIS 32:22-32

6. Jacob called the place where he wrestled with the angel *Peniel*, meaning the "face of God." The image of "face," referring to God, reminds us that God is a living person. Where is Peniel today? Where is it that we, personally, can wrestle with the living God and see His face?

The Bible is often seen as a book holding a lot of information. If that is all we get from it, we have missed the whole point. God's Word is one of today's *Peniels*. It is there that we can encounter not just stories, but a living God. It is through the Word that Jesus opens our

9. What difference might knowing God as a living person have for a Christian who had only previously known facts or stories about Him?

CLOSING:

Read John 9:1-7 and 35-41 together.

Sing and/or read the hymn, *Open My Eyes, Lord*.

PRAYER:

Open our eyes, Lord. Help us to see that faith in you is more than doctrines about you or empty rituals. Enable us to see you more clearly and recognize your presence in even the most mundane of circumstances. Deepen our faith in you! We pray in Jesus' name, AMEN.

LEADER'S NOTES

LESSON 1:

LIVING WITH CHAOS

Location: The Uncreated World

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

1. To identify the darkness and floodwaters present in our own lives.
2. To see the creation story in Genesis as a promise that the God who created order from chaos in the beginning is working in the darkness and floodwaters of our lives now in order to bring peace and life.
3. To recognize that just as God's Word was the instrument through which God created the universe and brought order out of chaos, God's Word (written and spoken) is the primary means by which God brings peace to our present darkness/flood/chaos.

GETTING STARTED (optional activity):

Show everyone an object (like a book or something of that size). Then distribute blindfolds and have everyone put them on. When no one can see, put the object somewhere in the room where they could never find it with blindfolds on. Tell the group that the objective of this game is to find the object you showed them, which is now hidden somewhere in that room.

Have everyone stand and turn around in a complete circle five times. This should disorient them. Then tell them to find the object. Remind them to go very slowly with their hands ahead of them so nobody will be hurt. After a few minutes tell everyone to stop and remark on how it felt to experience chaos.

Now guide them to the hidden book through your words. Tell each person when and where to turn, if they need to go straight, etc. until they are all able to locate the object. You may need to lead participants through