

The Importance of Little Words
Genesis 1:1-6
John 1:1-14

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In the beginning....

In the beginning of a new adventure....

What do you say?

That has been the question facing me. The last time I stood in a pulpit to preach was June 5—a lifetime ago in preacher years! And I was preaching in Canada! On that Sunday I was preaching to faces that I recognized, that I knew. I could call their names, and their children's names. I knew which side of the rivers they lived and whether their family descended from the New England Planters or were new arrivals, like me, (That would be anyone who arrived post 1900!)

But today!

You may find yourself feeling the same way. Things feel the same, sorta. You look around and you see a lot of the same people, except the face in the pulpit.

This really is a new beginning...for all of us.

So how do we begin? What are we to say?

Before we really begin I want to say thank you! When you meet my mother please tell her I said that!

Thank you for the warm welcome you have given Anita and me. The welcome basket was delicious!

But even more, thank you for the opportunity to come and be a part of this church. This will be an adventure for all of us all. I did not grow up Moravian. In fact until I went to Wake Forest I didn't know anything about the Moravians, but the president of the Baptist Student Union was a Moravian, the annual LoveFeast at Wake Forest was my favorite service of the year, and the Moravian Sugarcake from Deweys???

I have also come to appreciate your history. I have made several trips to Prague and have seen the statue of Jan Hus. I so admire your traditions and look forward to learning more in the next few months.

But this is new, and so I ask your grace as I mess up, as I do things wrong. Know I am trying! And feel free to ask any questions you might have. That is how we will learn and grow together.

And so today, we begin. As we do I want to share a story with you.

On November 5, 1988 Hardy Clemons walked into the pulpit of First Baptist Greenville for the first time. I was the Minister of Youth there, and Hardy was our new pastor. I promise you that you will hear more Hardyisms in the months ahead!

On that Sunday, as he began his sermon he said, *"The first work I want to say as your pastor is God."* I knew that if this day ever came I would repeat that line. So, the first word I want to say as your pastor is God.

God.

It is a word that we use a lot in church. The old story is told about a pastor who during the Children's Moment asked, *"Have you ever gone outside and seen a little animal with a long bushy tail running around gathering acorns? What is it called?"*

There was silence. The children looked at each other with puzzled looks on their faces until very slowly a little girl bravely raised her hand and said, *"I know the answer is God, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me!"*

God is the answer! That is the way it feels sometimes when we come to church. We know that the answer is God. God is a word we use often here; when we say a blessing over a meal; maybe even in a conversation. We talk about God; we even talk to God. But what do we mean? What do you believe about God?

I have asked myself that question many times and encourage you to spend some time this week answering that question for yourself. Write your answers down. Have a conversation with your family, with some friends. What do you believe about God.

I don't have time to give my full response, but this morning, as we begin our time together I want to share a few of my answers.

I believe God is.

Not a remarkable thing to come from the mouth of your pastor! But it is an affirmation that we need to remember. God is! It means that I don't buy into the belief that there is no God.

(I will say that that hasn't always been the case. There was a time in my life when I just chucked the whole thing. Some things had happened in my life and as I told a friend, *"Either there is no God or God is so far away that it really doesn't make any difference. I no longer believe in God."* But through the patience of friends who listened to my struggle, friends who believed for me for a while, I came to see that even though I didn't believe in God, God still believed in me.)

God is.

God exists. God is not just another good story, another fairy tale, a bunch of ancient superstition. The bedrock of my faith, of my life is, God is.

But that isn't quite enough. We live in a polytheistic world. (I wanted to use at least one big word today!) We live in a world filled with all sorts of gods floating around, gods of our making. These are the idols around which we arrange our lives, that we give ourselves to with all our being—wealth, career, sports teams, family, power, church. Gods that we

create, gods to whom we give our time and energy and finances; in short gods that we worship.

But the God of our faith is not one that we create. Rather the second affirmation I want to make is that it is God who creates and sustains life. Did you hear it in our scripture lessons? *“In the beginning God created....” In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. All things came into being through him.”*

God is about creation. In the beginning God created. It really doesn't matter to me how God created the world. There are many things in life that I don't understand. I don't understand where the files I save on the cloud are. I still don't understand how those little people get inside my TV set. I don't understand how in the blink of an eye, or quicker, my heart pumps blood throughout my body. I don't understand, but deeply appreciate those who do! When I go to the doctor and she tells me that I need to take this pill, I choose to believe her. And I choose to believe that God creates.

But God isn't through. God continues to create. Walk through a maternity ward at the hospital and see the expression on a mother's face as she holds her baby for the first time. The joy on her face? Babies are a sign that God has not given up on us; that God is still creating.

God doesn't just throw this creation together and then just walk away, checking back from time to time to reset the clocks. Rather, it is the constant grace of God that sustains us. I did not have to be. I did not have to be here. It is through the grace of God that we live and move and have our being.

God is.

God is creator and sustainer.

And God is other. God is not the same as creation.

We are in danger if we ever confuse the creation with the creator. One of the joys of being here is the beauty all around us! We are situated in a location where we can see the beauty of the trees changing color in just a few months; we can be on the coast in just a few hours. This is a beautiful place!

But God is not creation—whether it be a gorgeous landscape, a moving piece of music, a wonderful church, an inspiring minister, or even the Bible. To confuse the creation with the creator is idolatry. It limits the God we can know.

For that is the next thing I want to affirm about God. God is knowable. On January 1, 1974 Charles Schultz, the creator of the Peanuts comic strip was the Grand Marshall of the Rose Bowl Parade. That day's strip showed Lucy watching TV when Linus came in asking what she was watching. She said the Rose Bowl Parade and remarked that it had some of the most beautiful floats she had ever seen. Linus asked whether or not the Grand Marshall had come by, and Lucy responded by saying, *“Yeah, but it's nobody you ever heard of!”*¹

¹ <https://www.gocomics.com/peanuts/1974/01/01>

That is not the kind of God we worship! Our God is a personable God who is constantly seeking to be in relationship with us. One way of reading the Bible is to see the lengths God will go to know us, to be known by us.

But as rebellious creatures, we have always said that we would rather do it our way, until at last God gave us the ultimate revelation—Jesus Christ. Through him, God had a face. Yet humanity still said that we would rather be in control, and killed him. But the boundless love of God would not take that as the final word. God’s grace and love are, and always will be the final word!

No matter how hard we try to mess things up—and we do, don’t we—God is still at work bringing about good.

But even God can’t do it alone.

In his book, *Does God Have a Big Toe*, Rabbi Marc Gellman tells this story.

Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, “Why don’t you clean up this mess?”

So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, “Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be...just rocks.”

Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, “Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will become clouds, and some of this water will be...just water.”

*Then the angels said, “Well God, it’s neater now, but is it finished?” And God answered...
“NOPE!”*

On some of the rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things that only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, “Is the world finished now?” And God answered:

“NOPE!”

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, “I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me...really it’s almost done.”

But the man and the woman said, “We can’t finish the world alone! You have the plans and we are too little.”

“You are big enough,” God answered them. “But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner.”

The man and woman asked, “What’s a partner?”

And God answered, “A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on those days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That’s the deal.”

And they all agreed to that deal.

Then the angels asked God, "Is the world finished yet?" and God answered, "I don't know. Go ask my partners."

Which brings me to the second important little word. The first word is God. The second word is "and." Did you hear it in our gospel lesson?

*"In the beginning was the Word, **and** the Word was with God, **and** the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, **and** without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, **and** the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, **and** the darkness did not overcome it."*

And.

It is one of the first words we ever learn as we begin reading. It is a word of connection. It joins parts of a sentence together. It makes sentences go on, sometimes too long! It brings ideas and thoughts and people together.

It is what church is about. It is what this church is about.

Not all of us grew up Moravian. We come from many different backgrounds. Not all of us grew up in Kernersville. We come from all over, NC, the US, some of us even come from different countries! My guess is we don't read the Bible the same way, vote the same way, pull for the same teams! And that is good!

For when we come from all those places, with all our stuff, we bring others with us. Oh, maybe not physically, though that would be nice, but we bring our parents and grandparents, our teachers and friends, our ministers and mentors, those who have taught us the faith.

As I come this morning Docia Putnam and Paul Robbins, and Rick Traylor come along. Ed Christman and Hardy Clemons and Steve Shoemaker stand with me. As I minister among you Donna Forrester and Dorisanne Cooper and Phyllis Philbeck are right there alongside. Hopefully, I come with the best of what I have been taught at First Baptist Cherryville, Crescent Hill Baptist, First Baptist Lenoir and Greenville, and Providence Baptist, Gateway Community church in Bali and Port Williams United Baptist Church in Nova Scotia.

And you do the same! In fact it is a little crowded in here as we are surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses who have nurtured us and taught us and ministered alongside us in so many places and ways. And we bring them all with us.

That is what we are about as church. We are all in this together. By the grace of God, we are all in this, together.

For many years I woke up in expectation of reading the wonderful cartoon by Bill Waterson, Calvin and Hobbes, the story of a little boy and his stuffed tiger. We have the complete volumes—somewhere in a box, I think!

On the last Sunday that they came to our house the scene was a newly fallen snow. Calvin ran outside with Hobbes and said, *"Wow! It really snowed last night! Everything familiar has disappeared! The world looks brand new! A new year, a fresh clean start!"*

"It's like having a big white piece of paper to draw on!" said Hobbes!

"A day full of possibilities! It's a magical world, Hobbes, ol buddy!"

Then as they headed down the hill atop their sled Calvin said, *"Let's go exploring!"*

That is where we are today. We are at the beginning of something new. The word we have been using over these past months is "**adventure**." We don't know what lies ahead. But there are two things of which I am sure. The God who created us and sustains us, who loves us and has called us into relationship with God and each other will be our partner.

Two little words with great importance.

God.

And.

The rest is an adventure. Let's go exploring!