

# “That Persistent Question”

Genesis 16:1-9

John 13:1-5 & 12-15

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*“Where have you come from and where are you going?”*

(Genesis 16:8)

**W**here did I come from?  
the first grader asked his  
mother.

Mom took a deep breath and launched into a six-year-old version of the birds and the bees. Then she asked, “What made you wonder where you came from?”

He said, “Bobby told me he came from Chicago, I just wondered where I came from”!

Sometimes we answer questions that aren’t being asked. Sometimes the question asked leads to deeper answers.

That’s the case with the text of our sermon this morning. It’s a suggestive as well as a ‘persistent question.’ And it’s all tucked away in a seldom-dusted corner of the Bible.

## **An ‘Eternal Triangle’**

Out of the misty origins of the Hebrew people comes the story of a runaway slave girl named Hagar.

Turns out she had good reason to run. She had gotten caught up in what we today call ‘the eternal triangle.’ It was a real three-cornered affair.

Abram’s wife, Sarai, well past the age of childbearing, was nonetheless threatened by her barrenness. Abram was frustrated by the unending delays in the birth of the child God had promised.

So Sarai offered her maid Hagar to Abram “*as a wife,*” hoping she might conceive and bear the promised child. This was okay according to the cultural mores of that day.

The rub came when Hagar tried to run up the score. Once proudly pregnant, she attempted to dislodge her mistress Sarai.

Not surprisingly, a scrap ensued between these two raw-boned women – a tug-of-war Abram had to try and resolve. Predictably, he sided with his wife Sarai.

Hagar, realizing she was ‘outgunned’ in the affair, decided to beat a hasty retreat.

That’s where we find her today, ‘with child’ and on the run in the desert. She has fallen exhausted beside a spring of water in the wilderness.

There an angel of the Lord appears to her and poses ‘that persistent question:’

*Where have you come from  
and where are you going?*

Whether or not you choose to remember this quaint story, the question it raises is worthwhile in and of itself. It’s the sort of question that can open the door to serious reflection and exploration of the greatest mysteries of our existence.

‘Where did we come from?’ That’s a question of our *origins*. ‘Where are we going?’ That’s a question of our *destiny*.

## Comings and Goings

Hagar doesn’t have much to say about either of the angel’s questions. She says little about her ‘comings,’ and nothing about her ‘goings.’ That’s still pretty much the case.

The question of origins – “*Where have you come from?*” – leaves lots of people little to choose.

Science tells us about chemicals and protoplasm, amphibians and apes. Genesis reports on a bit of dust, moistened into clay, and molded into human form.

“It’s nothing very fancy either way,” a college student once told me. “Our origins all come down to monkeys or mud!”

About the best recent investigators can tell us is that as a species we have been coming along for some while now – give or take a few million years. But to what end there seems no clear consensus.

Some authorities contend we are here mostly to keep the species going. Avoiding extinction may be goal enough for a pig or a pigeon, but it’s hardly enough to satisfy a person. Yet few hazard an answer of any greater substance.

When it came to her future, “*Where are you going?*” Hagar uttered not a word.

Others have, of course, Clarence Darrow among them, though in a dour sort of way. Once the famed attorney gave this out as his considered opinion upon the matter.

*“There is no goal in living,” Darrow concluded. “If we knew where we were going we could pick out the road. But so far as science, philosophy or history can throw any light on the subject, we are not going anywhere.”*

That may be a bit extreme. Some authorities report progress. Our chins and lower jaws are receding. Ears are getting smaller. Appendixes have about played out. Shin bones are on the run.

Looks as if our species may be getting stripped down for more mental exercises, perhaps even some spiritual disciplines.

More than that, few will say.

Left on their own, most people aren’t sure where they’ve come from and why; aren’t certain where they’re going and why; and aren’t at all clear what to do along the way...*and why.*

Imagine! Nowhere to start, no place to go, and nothing important to do along the way. This is where the natural wisdom of our day leads us.

## **Origin and Destiny**

No wonder we keep turning back to that ancient conversation between Hagar and the angel of God. Perhaps you noticed, only the messenger of God had much to offer. This seems always to be the way of it.

Maybe this is why we keep cocking our ears toward that clearest messenger of them all, Jesus of Nazareth. Mark you, when it comes to questions about our origins or our destiny, Jesus had no explanation – only a *proclamation*. It is a message you are free to take or leave.

But know this. All who accept Jesus’ word find it to be an unshakable foundation well worth trusting their weight to. John’s Gospel puts Jesus’ word like this:

*“Jesus, knowing...  
he had come from God  
and was going to God,  
began to wash the disciples feet.”*

What if the same could be said of people like us who follow Jesus? What if for us, too, it is true – we “*came from God*”?

Frankly I wish we would spend less time in the gravel pits of the world trying to link our origins with the beasts and a little more thought and prayer pondering the potentialities of our kinship with God.

Don't I remember learning we have been "*created...in the image of God*" (Gen. 1:27)?

It's not the beasts or God, of course, it's both. We are "*of the earth, earthy*" (I Cor. 15:47), but we hold a "*treasure in earthen vessels*" (II Cor. 4:7).

Part of this treasure is our assurance that the creative hand of God has touched us, formed us, and left on us His signature. "*Let us make man in our image,*" God said, "*male and female God created them*" (Gen 1:26-27).

Everything that gives value to human life begins with this conviction. You and I are original masterpieces shaped by God's holy imagination!

Jesus was also "*going to God.*" What if this were also true for those of us who believe in Jesus?

I'm weary of those pictures, plans and programs that purport to present precisely how things will be the other side of death.

A lot of people, you know, disbelieve in the *reality* of *the-life-to-come* partly because early along they had foisted on them some caricature of heaven.

Let's settle it right now – pearly gates, heavenly harps, golden streets, many-roomed mansions are *symbols*. The glory behind these symbols is *God Himself* – the God Jesus revealed as our loving Heavenly Father. *God* is the goal and *Christ* is the prize (Philippians 3:14)!

Every moment – today and tomorrow, sleeping and waking, working and playing – every minute marks another milestone in a Christian's journey homeward.

We are going step-by-step back to the Christ who redeemed us, back to the God who created us, back to the Father who welcomes us home.

## On His Knees

"*Coming from God*" that's our origin – "*going to God*" that's our destiny. And in the meantime... *what?* Well, for Hagar the angel's command was clear enough, "*Return to your mistress, and submit to her.*"

In other words, go back to being a servant. We expect this in Hagar's case – a servant girl.

But a similar sequence in Jesus' life takes our breath away. Turn your imagination loose to try and grasp that biblical span "*from everlasting to everlasting*" (Psalm 90:2).

It says, Jesus "*came from God.*" All right, try imagining the former glory from which Christ "*came.*"

The past drifts back and back before the universe was created, back to that single point where God is the only reality. That's where you'll find Christ! "*He was in the beginning with God*" (John 1:2).

And Jesus was "*going to God.*" Imagine a future where the sun has gone dark and the earth is void, and all that's left is that glorious realm where God alone knows the way. And Christ is there, having "*departed from this world and gone to the Father*"! (John 13:1).

Now, with the eternal glories of Christ's past and the divine mysteries of Christ's future swirling in your imagination, open your eyes to the startling scene John sketches in his Gospel – *Jesus is washing feet!*

*Feel the point!* It was not in spite of God in Him that dropped Jesus to his knees crawling from one pair of dirty feet to another. No, not 'in spite of God,' but *because* of God! Haven't you noticed this?

- It's the insecure people, uncertain about their origin or their destiny, who are reduced to bullying and brutalizing their way through life.
- It's those who have been touched by God and who have touched God, who eagerly kneel with Jesus and offer their lives to others.

Might this be God's intended purpose for our brief journey from origin to destiny?

When you know that you have "*come from God*" and that you are "*going to God,*" you are free at last to follow Christ's example of caring for others whose feet are dusty and bruised from their journey.

The next time you wonder 'What it's all about?' consider that it is all about this – a kind and tender mercy shown to people who have been broken by their unwise choices and wounded by their painful journey.

Do you suppose the day will ever come when our angry and brutal world will discover *this* to be the solution to its hostilities and anguish?

The world may never get clear on this, but believers must! In the interim between our *origin* in God and our *destiny* in God, our Lord

has given us the assignment to serve the weary, the broken and the desperate. Why else would Jesus say:

*I have set you an example,  
that you should for others  
as I have done for you.*

(John 13:15)