

St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
Creation Series 2
January 22, 2012

Gen. 2; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Cor. 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

When I was in 10th grade, a kid in my biology class – a bright guy, he went on to Brown – stated his earnest understanding that boys had one fewer rib than girls! We looked at him, incredulous. “Well, because God took a rib from Adam and gave it to Eve!” he declared.

So much for science and scripture! This account of creation from Genesis 2 *is* a strange story, so different from Genesis 1 that we heard last week. Scholars believe that they likely were written at different times by different authors. They use different words for God. The structure and content is quite different. Genesis 1 is orderly, talking about the cosmos, the sun and stars. God speaks each part of creation into being. And then calls upon the earth and the waters to produce living creatures within them. There is an order to the verses, you can diagram them out and it follows a pattern. Day 1 corresponds with Day 4 dealing with light, sky, and celestial bodies; Day 2 corresponds with Day 5, dealing with the waters and its creatures, Day 3 corresponds with Day 6 having to do with the land and its creatures, and then there is Day 7, the day God rests, and it is all declared to be very good. Humans are the last to be created in Genesis 1, the culmination of creation are we.

Genesis 2, by contrast, is earthier, messier. As William Brown says, “creation comes crashing down to earth.”ⁱ Humans are first, rather than last, by this account. Human is formed out of dust, earthy stuff, and God breathes into the human’s nostrils. God is not remote but intimate, breathing life into the human’s nostrils, walking about in the garden, grubbing about in the dirt like a gardener or potter. It is all very earthly. The word for human is *’ādām* in Hebrew. The word for ground or earth is *’ādāmāh*. To make this connection, “human” in Genesis 2 is often translated “earthling” or “groundling.”

There is order to the Genesis 2 account also, though quite different from Genesis 1. Here, each move of creation is preceded by a lack, some deficiency that the Lord then moves to correct.ⁱⁱ The earth is dry and barren, so the Lord God sends the rains. There is no one to serve it and protect it, so the Lord makes the earthling. There is no companion for the earthling, so the Lord makes the animals. They don’t quite do it for the earthling, though, so the Lord God takes the first earthling and makes another slightly different earthling. Many scholars claim that earthling is not gendered until the creation of the woman. So there is a quality of emergence here that is interesting, almost a kind of adaptive management. In contrast to Genesis 1, it is almost a process of creating something, finding it “not-good” or “not quite good” and making it good. And that better is all relational. It has to do with how humans and the rest of the natural world are situated with and for each other.

We didn’t read aloud the verses that come next, but you all know what happens in Genesis Chapter 3. This is the chapter that Christians have traditionally understood as an account of “original sin,” even though the word sin never appears. Instead, it describes how “the maturing of humans into civilized life involved the damage of connections between the Lord God, man, woman and earth.”ⁱⁱⁱ In verse one we meet the serpent. (It is

worth noting that in the ancient world, snakes were associated with wisdom, fertility, and immortality. It is only later that the snake is interpreted by Christians as the devil.) The snake initiates a conversation with the woman, though scripture is quite clear that the man was there too. The snake introduces doubt by rightly predicting what will happen if humans eat of the fruit – they will not be put to death, but their eyes will be opened. The woman sees that the fruit is good for food and a delight to the eyes and so she eats it and gives some to the man and he eats it. They see for the first time that they are naked and sew fig leaves together to cover themselves. The Lord God confronts them, they deny and then blame each other, which cannot have helped matters. A proclamation of sentence follows, first upon the snake, then upon the woman, and then upon the man. This sentence has been described as a curse, though the word “curse” never appears, and believe me, there are plenty of passages in the Old Testament where it does. The text says that the woman will experience toil and pain in reproduction and will be ruled by her husband, and the man will have the toil of working the land, by sweat and labor, and dealing with thorn and thistles. This is not a command or a mandate from God. Woman is not destined or commanded by God to be subordinate to man, and man is commanded by God to be forever a failed farmer. That’s not what God wants for us. What is being expressed here is the tragic consequence of ruptured relationship, where the previous natural connectedness between God and humans, the man and woman with each other and the rest of the natural world has disintegrated. The intention for all of us, for our relationships with each other and the rest of the natural world is mutuality, care, and recognizing our interdependence, that we are all one, that what happens to one of us happens to everyone. This does not come easily to us. We have to be intentional about it. We have to work at it.

Along these lines contemporary scholars have pointed out another important distinction between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Genesis 1 portrays humans as the culmination of creation, and somewhat above it, distinct from the rest of the natural world, and having a responsibility to care for it. The word “stewardship” is often used, invoking human land management where the owner entrusts the care of his land to a steward to manage it for its safekeeping. Genesis 2 on the other hand, while it also directs the earthling to tend the earth, emphasizes humans’ interconnection to all life. By the Genesis 2 account, humans not above the natural world in some hierarchy of being, but rather are part of creation, intimately and radically connected to all life, and bound by its laws.

This notion of interconnectedness resonates with contemporary notions of environmental sustainability that we find in the writings of Paul Hawken and others. Having an ethical understanding about how we are to live on earth is important, but it is not sufficient: stewardship can too easily be reduced to a kind of property management. When we truly understand ourselves to be part of the natural world and subject to its laws, we think differently about how we live and what we eat and how we make things. We then understand that earth systems are based on a sense of natural balance and harmony that in turn provide norms for human performance. This balance and harmony is reflected in earth systems -- forests and oceans and wetlands and sand dunes have to be able to function for the whole to be healthy. We then understand that when we introduce genetically modified substances and toxins into the environment this cannot be reversed, and they function the same way that a virus affects our bodies, replicating itself and

sometimes permanently changing the host organism. We then understand that everything we do affects everything else, and that we are part of a system that has limits. Scientists and engineers and even industrial designers are starting to look at earth systems as a model. Old-style industrial processes have been described as “take-make-waste,” it’s linear, it’s one-way. In dramatic contrast, earth’s processes are cyclical; everything is recycled back into the system to become food for someone else. There is no waste. All of life gets what it needs. We tend to plant or grow or make things we like or want or need and kill or subdue the rest. Earth’s design thrives on diversity. People are starting to think differently about how we make things, about how we live along nature’s model.

All of this calls on – demands, in fact – our active participation. I would say that what is required is not non-intervention – which is virtually impossible – but intervention for the wellbeing of all life, humans and the rest of the natural world. Calvin DeWitt has helpfully interpreted Genesis 2:15, which has been traditionally translated “And the Lord God took the human and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it.” The words “till” and “keep” have been more closely understood to be “to serve” and to protect.” This language, DeWitt claims, sets up a relationship and expectation of “con-service,” with humans and the natural world serving each other in a relationship of mutuality and care. This relationality is evident in today’s gospel lesson too. Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, to work along side him, to go out two-by-two. No one, not even Jesus, is on a solo project.

Creation is on-going. God is actively at work in the “patterns and processes to make possible human wellbeing and the wellbeing of [all things.]”^{iv} Christ gathers all things to himself, toward the fulfillment of the kingdom of God on earth. But we cannot presume that we are guaranteed human good, through some kind of lazy grace, but rather are called on behalf of all life to work toward the vision of mutual care and abundance.

And how are we to understand God’s relationship to the rest of the natural world? That will be our subject in a couple of weeks when we explore what the book of Job has to say about creation. Amen.

ⁱ William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 79.

ⁱⁱ Brown, 80.

ⁱⁱⁱ Commentary on Genesis 3 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed., Michael D. Coogan, Ed.

^{iv} Allen Verhey, *Nature and Altering It*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 141, in which he describes James M. Gustafson’s typology of participation as regards humans’ relationship to nature.