

March 1, 2020
Genesis 2:4b-9,15-25
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Living Earth

INTRO TO SCRIPTURE

Each week this month the confirmation group is meeting after worship to talk about the sermon theme. So, I decided to go big and cover the arc of the bible – from creation to the early church.

As I thought about what thread to use to tie it all together, I decided to ponder the tension between our proclamation that creation is good and yet the reality that life is often so hard. People have always wondered - What is God's saving work in the world?

Twenty-five years ago, I attended a week-long seminar with Marcus Borg. His reflections changed my theology – especially his insight that there are three macro-stories of salvation woven into the Jewish scriptures and into the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth: bondage/freedom, exile/home, sin/forgiveness. We will consider those themes over the next three weeks, but today we start with creation.

The Bible begins with two stories of creation. IN Genesis 1, we hear a series of majestic proclamations – *And God said* - to bring the universe into existence.

In Genesis 2 & 3 – the story of Adam & Eve, as we often call it – we find an older story – a more intimate story – in which God, like a potter, forms earthlings.

I wish we all knew Hebrew because English translations of this story just don't do it justice. In the Hebrew, this story is full of word plays and ironic humor. For example:

Adamah is the word for ground/earth
Adam is the word for the earthling God creates out of the earth.

Eve resembles the word for living.

So, the names Eve and Adam identify us as living earth, which is the sermon title.

There are different words in Hebrew that specifically mean man and woman – *ish* and *ishah*. These words don't show up until the end of the story in Genesis 2. (Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.)

Today, I'm going to read selected verses from the Genesis 2 creation story using the words earthling, man and woman to help us hear when gender differentiation appears in the story.

SCRIPTURE

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up – for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground – then the Lord God formed an earthling from the dust of the ground, and breathed into the earthling's nostrils the breath of life, and the earthling became a living being.

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there God put the earthling whom God formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...

The Lord God put the earthling in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the earthling.

“You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

*Then the Lord God said,
“It is not good that the earthling should be alone; I will make a helper to be a partner. So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the earthling, and whatever the earthling called every living creature that was its name. the earthling gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the earthling there was not found a helper to be a partner.*

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the earthling and took a rib and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib God made into a woman. Then the earthling said,

*“This at last is bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh;
This one shall be called woman
For out of man this one was taken.*

...

And they were naked and not ashamed.

***HYMN O God, As with a Potter’s Hand*

SERMON

Once upon a time, the Holy One, like a skillful sculptor, went searching for just the right clay. Upon finding it, the divine potter scooped up the clay and with joyous creativity crafted an earth sculpture. It was beautiful to behold and easy to keep track of because it didn’t move. So, God sat for a whole afternoon just enjoying this new creation.

However, God wasn’t really looking for a work of art. God wanted a living, breathing creature to interact with. But God knew just how risky that really was. That’s why God sat for a whole afternoon. Once you set something in motion, you can’t take it back. Finally, God decided the risk was worth it. So, God blew the breath of life into the clay and the earthling received the spirit of God and became a living be-ing.

God was thrilled, *Ooooooh, this is so very good.* The earthling delighted in the sensations of living, the ebb and flow of soft sweet air into lungs, the power of muscles to move from place to place, the warmth of the rising sun each morning and the gift of sleep with the encircling dark. Life was good!

However, in time God realized the earthling was lonely. God tried animals and birds for companions, but they weren’t quite right.

So, God made a drastic decision. The one earthling must become two. Very carefully, God made another earthling from the side of the first – so they could stand side by side as companions. And now they became woman and man. Bone of the same bone, flesh of the same flesh. And when, on

occasion, they came together in passionate embrace, it was if they were one flesh again.

And they lived happily ever after.

It was a familiar story right up until that last line. We know they didn't live happily ever after. That's a Disney fantasy, not a biblical reality. There's the rest of the story – which begins in Genesis 3 and goes to the present. With the gift of being spirit-enlivened creatures comes the responsibility of freedom and the temptations we face.

Tragically, this spiritually provocative and engaging story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 & 3 has become a temptation itself. Too often in church history theologians have been tempted by their own misogyny and have used and abused this story to denigrate women.

More than one theologian has been known to argue that women are inferior because the story tells us that woman came from man. However, by that same argument, man is inferior to the earth, because man came from the earth. Ironically, none of them came to that corollary conclusion.

In Genesis 3 the reality of temptations is embodied in the character of the serpent, who is more *crafty* than any other wild animal. We know from our own experience that temptations can come from outside us, but they also come from within, such as when we are unwilling to accept responsibility for our own actions.

Here's a version of Genesis 3, someone in a parenting group once shared with me.

God said: Don't

Don't what: Adam replied.

Don't eat the forbidden fruit!

We got forbidden fruit!

Hey, Eve, we've got forbidden fruit!

No way: said Eve

Yes, way!

Don't eat the fruit! said God

Why? they asked

Because I said so! said God,

beginning to wonder if maybe it would have been better to have stopped after making the elephants.

A little while later God saw them

having an apple break.

Didn't I tell you not to eat the fruit?

Uh, huh: Adam replied

Then why did you? God asked

I dunno: Eve answered.

She started it: Adam said.

Did not.

Did too.

Did not. It's the serpent's fault.

Having had it with the two of them, God's consequences were that they would have children of their own.

It's not easy to grow up or to help others grow up, whether we're talking about individuals or our whole species. In the garden, Adam and Eve are growing up as they experience temptation, wisdom and consequences.

We still know the challenge of temptations. As psychologist Carl Jung wrote:

All the old primitive sins are not dead, but are crouching in the ...corners of our modern hearts.

(Imaging the Word, V 2, p. 149)

-We are still tempted to stray from God's wisdom - abusing our freedom and acting with disobedience.

-We are still tempted to blame others for our decisions - becoming estranged from one another.

-We are still tempted to forget we are indeed earthlings – in so doing, denigrating life on earth.

As we enter into this season of Lent, we are reminded that in the synoptic gospels, after God's claim on Jesus at his baptism, Jesus immediately is led or driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he is tempted by the character of the devil.

Jesus is tempted:

to override the ways of nature,

to test God, and

to worship the tempter.

Jesus refuses.

Throughout human history we have been living with the tension between the consequences of human brokenness and the hope of God's saving work. Over the next three weeks we will consider bondage/freedom, exile/home, sin/forgiveness.

Called as partners in Christ's service, may we be about the work of reconciling folk on earth.