

“Companionship”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 8, 2019

Genesis 2:4a-9, 15-25

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This is sometimes referred to as the second story of creation: some believe that it likely dates back to a time even centuries earlier than the first story of creation, the one that precedes Lynn’s reading, that literally begins with the words “in the beginning.” That first story is about God speaking the world and all that is in it – including humans – into being; creating order out of chaos, separating water from land, earth from sky, and day from night; patterning our lives into weekly spans of work and Sabbath rest; and declaring it all good.

This second story of creation is different. God does not speak and sort, but molds clay into creatures and breathes them to life. Our intimate connection to the earth is preserved in the Hebrew word for “human being” – *Adam* – which comes from the same root as the word for “ground” – *adamah*. If we wanted to capture this play on words, instead of referring to this first human being as “Adam,” we should call him “Dusty.”¹

One of the first things we notice about this story is the surprising reason that God creates human beings in the first place: the text tells us that when God began, there was “no plant of the field” on earth and “no herb...had yet sprung up.” At the beginning of creation, the earth was a barren field. God wants to plant a garden, but “there was no one to till the ground.”

We often think that, from the beginning, human beings were the stars of creation, but in this version, what God really wants is a garden. Humans are created to be those gardeners. We come from the dirt, made to care for what God will grow in the garden, destined to return to the earth. This, from the beginning, is who we are.

Today marks the beginning of a new program year for this and many other churches: we are signifying that summer is ending and fall brings a new schedule and pattern for our ministry and worship. Youth and adult Christian Education resumes today, as does youth group and our chancel choir. Weekly Sunday fellowship time is back; and next week, we have planned for an all-church picnic following – hopefully – worship in the outdoor chapel.

In worship, we are also at the point of a new beginning: this is the first week in a cycle of scripture readings that we follow called the Narrative Lectionary. The purpose of a lectionary is to provide a wide breadth of scripture readings over the course of the

¹ Robert Williamson, Jr., “Reading Eden in a Time of Ecological Crisis”

year: not just the ones that might be familiar or easy or in line with the way we already think. A good lectionary should be challenging, engaging, and faithful to God's purposes.

With the Narrative Lectionary, storytelling is emphasized. In each of the four yearly cycles of the Narrative Lectionary – this is the second of the four – scriptures are selected that provide opportunities for telling stories; both within and beyond the weekly sermon and worship service. This fall, we will walk through various portions of the Hebrew Bible; starting today, at the beginning, in Genesis. Our focus will stay here in the Old Testament through the season of Advent until, as we come to Christmas and then move into the New Year, we begin and continue with readings from the Gospel of Mark. This gospel – the earliest, barest, and often most direct – will be our focus throughout the spring, up to and beyond Easter, and for the remainder of the program year.

But we begin today, as is fitting, at the beginning. While, often, it is the second half of this story, in chapter three, that gets most of the attention – the part about the serpent, the temptation, and the forbidden fruit – chapter two is also rich soil to till. For here, we learn the fundamental truth that it is not good for the human being – Adam – to be alone. Seeing this, God first creates all the other creatures of the earth, allowing Adam to name them; but as beautiful, varied, and useful as they may be, they do not make for fitting companions.

God therefore decides to create for Adam a helper and partner. Before this point, there is no distinction between man or woman, but now, Dusty gets someone to garden with; and so much more. Here, “helper” is not to mean to imply an apprentice or assistant – certainly not a second-class citizen – but to show what of significance can be done when humans don't have to act alone. Throughout the Old Testament, we see humans calling out to God to be our helper; and thus, God has anticipated our need by creating companionship for us.

Thus, if gender roles – either in the church or in our larger society – have been based upon this second creation story, they have misinterpreted the original meaning. Human helpers, whether male or female, are not meant to be subservient or lacking in rights; but relationships with our partners ought to be revered as is our relationship with God. Chapter two ends with the affirmation that these partners were not ashamed: not of their nakedness, but also not of the way that they treated one another; it was not good for Dusty to be alone, so God made it better.²

This may be why, in some more modern translations, this relationship of partner and helper is called “companionship.” If you are fan of *pain du chocolat*, or if you ever eat at *Panini's*, you might notice that right in the middle of this word – companionship – is the French word for bread, *pain*. A companion is, therefore, someone that you eat

² Roger Nam from *WorkingPreacher.com*

bread with. Thus, in an ancient agrarian society, they are the ones that you live and learn with, till, sow and reap with, cook with, and ultimately gather at table with. If we are meant, from the beginning, to be farmers, God saw that it was not good for us to do it alone. Sometimes, that means that there is someone else who has a different skill that complements our own; sometimes it means that there is someone to take over when we get tired or frustrated; and other times it just means there will be someone next to us to help us as we work through our day, and to sit next to us after the labor is done.

It is not good for us to be alone. This simple truth certainly seems to get more complex as the story progresses, though. As we have already been told, within the garden stands both the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Many have conjectured what these two trees actually represent; but they at least teach us that within God's creation, there are measures of both permission and prohibition; there exists both freedom and limits.

We all know what happens in the next chapter beyond today's reading. The fruit of the tree that God has forbidden becomes too tempting to resist. Both partners willingly eat of it and learn that there are consequences to their decisions. They are created by God to be gardeners, but – soon enough – they cannot resist the desire to be like gods.

We know this story well, but – surprisingly – it does not seem to be a major influence on the rest of the Old Testament. This story of the fall – as we often call it – does not seem to be determinant for the authors of scripture; they seem not to be struggling with this question of how evil came into the world that seems to be the focus of chapter 3. What does resonate, though, is this dual vocation that human beings are given by God in the second chapter: 1) that we are made to work: to till the soil and bring forth from the ground good food to eat; and 2) that it is not good for us to be alone and therefore we should be companions, those who share bread, with each other.

The implications of this two-pronged, God-given vocation are almost endless. First, in a time of immense ecological crisis and change, it should remind us of our innate and powerful link to the earth from which we were formed. While the first creation story describes us as stewards or caretakers of creation; here, in the second account, we are called to be cultivators: those who seek to conserve and preserve the good gifts that are given; including water, soil and air. We should never forget that what God seems to have wanted first was a beautiful garden; and needed us to care for it in order for God's dream to become reality.

Therefore, part of the core message of this creation story relates to the dignity of work. As any gardener knows, cultivation often requires getting your hands dirty. Much of the most important work happens even before the first seed hits the ground. It requires a balance of patience and urgency; requiring us to be flexible and responsive to conditions as they emerge.

As we begin a new program year here at Valley, many of the same principles apply. Lots of the most important work will take place behind the scenes; much of it can be planned out and based on acquired wisdom, but will need to adjust and adapt as time goes on. And at the core, all of the ways we serve in God's name – public or private, simple or complex, in word or deed – all are part of the same ecosystem, all done together for the glory of God, and all because God does not call us to be gods, but to be the people of God; in and of God's creation.

And a second important implication of God's story of creation, as passed along to us in Genesis 2, is the primacy of companionship. We all know about the increasing possibility and popularity of worshipping alone; whether on television or online or by cobbling together our own faith from different available sources. In so many other areas of life, after all, we seek to do things by ourselves and for ourselves.

But in Genesis 2, God bluntly says this way of thinking – if we adhere to it too closely – is not good for us. We are not meant to be alone. This may or may not mean that we have a life partner, but it certainly means that we engage in relationships where we are open to accept help from others because that that help is good for us; it makes us better.

Therefore, at church, we go out of our way to try to break through the walls that divide us and instead promote fellowship, companionship, helping and sharing bread together. We seek to do this with neighbors near and far, with friends and strangers, with people similar to us and different from us. At times, this is cumbersome for us; some folks might be wondering why there is so much talking instead of doing; why so many faith misunderstandings and seemingly failed attempts at becoming unified?

I won't argue now with those critiques. But what we must remember is that just because we fall short, God is not wrong. We are not meant to be alone. Even though it might seem easier to go it alone, in the end, we are linked together. God's vision for humanity is not mere collection of individuals, but human beings who realize that we are made of the earth, animated by God's breathe, and share with one another a connection that cannot be denied; we are of the very same bone and body. No matter what may separate us, there is much more that binds us together.

And yet, this is only the beginning of the story. Week by week, as we walk through the scriptures, we will hear the words of God's intended purpose for creation. We are God's people; and that is not the only the truth that we proclaim; it is also good news. Amen.