

“Connecting Earth and Humanity”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger; Rally Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; September 8, 2019

Genesis 2:4b-25

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 man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had 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. A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

And the Lord God commanded the man, “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 man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his 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 man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man 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.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Driving to church this week, I saw a bumper sticker that neatly summarized today’s Scripture. It said, “God’s original plan was to hang out in a garden with naked vegetarians.” Yes, things have gone in a bit of a different direction since, but the *original* plan was simple, sweet and good. That’s what the writers of Genesis 2 would have us understand. God creates humanity from the very beginning, and establishes connection: first with God, second with creation, and then with one another. How is God calling us to think about those relationships today—in light of yet another devastating hurricane season, and as the Amazon continues to burn? When humans rely on creation for air, food, shelter and *everything* else in our vulnerable lives, yet we persist in poisoning our earthly cradle?

And the Lord God, we read, formed the first human creature from the dust of the ground and the breath of the Lord God. All people were intimately made by a loving God, and formed from earth. The Hebrew makes clear the connection between people and earth. ‘*adam* is the name for the creature, and ‘*adamah* is fertile ground. The word connection is clearer when we translate it this way: the Lord God formed human from humus. The same nutrients, water and stuff of earth out of which comes everything else is also that which grows humanity. We are *all* ‘*adam*.

Creating *'adam*, God created humans who live in relationship in three ways: relation to God, relation to creation, and relation to one another. And with each relation there is vocation—a purpose and calling given to humanity. God creates us, *'adam*, out of love, and it is to God that we owe our entire existence. Our relation to God is that of the creature to the Creator, and our first vocation is to live in gratitude for the One from whom all things arise.

As Genesis unfolds, we see that our second relation—and vocation—is to creation. God planted the garden of creation: “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.” There are abundant rivers and fertile ground, a global jungle of every type of plant, birds of the air and fish in the sea, minerals in abundance! The garden of God’s creation, Eden (which means “delight”), has everything good in it, everything we need for life, and even the awareness of good and evil. Into the midst of the garden God places us, *'adam*, and gives us the very first human calling. We belong in the garden, in order to “till it and keep it.” The word in Hebrew here is *shamar*, to “guard, keep, watch over, protect and care for.” Our first vocation, our first reason for existing in the Garden, is that of *shamar*, taking care of the earth on God’s behalf. Genesis tells us that all the creatures of the earth were made as helpers for humanity, but we do not have free reign to do whatever we please. Our freedom reaches its limit when we cease to *shamar* and begin to exploit creation for our own purposes alone. Humanity cares for creation as God cares for us—with compassion, tenderness, and generosity.

Finally, God recognized that even all the loveliness of the world was not enough for *'adam*. We have relation to earth—with cats, dogs, other pets, and wild creatures—but this is not enough for humanity. God says, “it is not good that *'adam* should be alone”, and so after creating all sorts of animals God creates once more. God made another creature like *'adam*, “bone from bone and flesh from flesh”, that we might truly know others like ourselves. Humans from humus are made with one more vocation: to be helpers and partners for one other.

On this day when we celebrate a new start for church programs, the Bible reminds us what truly matters from the very beginning. All our lives, we honor creation by following our vocation in each relation: gratitude to God, service to the earth, and partners with one another.

What I love most about this Genesis creation story is this God does not remain far off, but is right alongside us, among us in the garden of the world. From the very beginning, God gets into the mud and muck of creation, forms and shapes *'adam* from *'adamah*, then directly breathes in life. It’s a bodily, immanent, close, earthly picture of God we get, right from the start. I think of that line from the Gospel of Thomas (77b), suggesting that Jesus said: “Split wood, I am there. Lift up a rock, you will find me there.” God gets in the dirt with us, including in the messy times when we fall out of right relationship with one another, the Earth or God. God is in the battered islands of the Bahamas, in the feverish atmosphere growing more choked with carbon each day, and in the wild resistance to human encroachment, the natural creative adaptation that survived the extinction of dinosaurs and could survive the extinction of humanity as well.

That dread and promise are the gospel good news for us today. We are formed with love and placed in this magnificent creation to be humble caretakers for this wondrous world. This was not the original plan from that bumper sticker, to be sure, but God is still faithful to deliver and rescue. God would lead us from loneliness to companionship—with God, each other and creation, that we might be at home in God’s garden all our days. If we fall short of that as a species, failing to *shamar* and making selfish, short-sighted decisions instead, we risk hearing the words of commendation spoken over the human race: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Even that is good news, because God is in the dust, and could create something new again. By returning to the dust, we return to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.