

Narrative Lectionary: Garden of Eden

September 8, 2019

Do you ever have one of those days when it feels like everything just goes right? You hit every traffic light green. You get to work early. Your boss is having a good day. You find \$20 in a coat pocket. Your spouse fixes your favorite meal for dinner.

Or maybe sometimes it's part of a day that goes well. I officiated at a wedding for Sarah Tambling and her now husband Robert in California a couple weeks ago, and I hit all the right spots on the wedding sermon.

It had been a tough trip for many people getting to the wedding, because it was a destination wedding on the California coast. Flights were delayed, there was construction on Highway 1. So I used that as a theme- what would a destination marriage be all about? What challenges do you have to work through to get to that destination of deeper and more mature love? That was working really well in my opening thoughts. And then you know I like to use movies as illustrations, and I started to talk about the Tom Hanks' movie *Castaway*- turns out that is the groom's favorite movie- he watches it at least once a year. This sermon hit all the right notes. Sometimes life is like that.

Or sometimes things don't go as well as you'd like. It's like my Tuesday a couple weeks ago. I had a rather hectic day, travelling from meeting to meeting. I was in charge of grilling for movie night, and also had a guitar lesson beforehand. So I was squeezing in a last minute shopping trip to get some buns and burgers at Fred Meyer. I was in the self-checkout line, and in a hurry, and when I put my debit card in, and punched in my pin number, all of a sudden it sounded like a winning slot machine at Spirit Mountain Casino.

All this money started coming out: a bunch of coins and bills. And I thought, What is going on? And I realized the machine had asked me if I wanted cash back, and I thought it was asking me for my pin number, so that's what I put in. My pin number starts with a 9, and there are four digits, so I got almost \$100 back that I didn't want along with the hotdogs and buns, so I put that money back in the offering plate on Sunday. Sometimes things just don't go as you planned.

I got to thinking of this when I looked at the creation stories this week. You know there are two creation stories in Genesis, don't you? There is the story most of us think of in Genesis 1, when God creates day by day. And then there is the second story of creation in Genesis 2, where things happen in a different sequence.

And by the way, this is Hebrew poetry, and it's not meant to be science. The Hebrew people were telling stories about a loving and inventive God creating all of this. They didn't have the science we have today. So I don't think there's any conflict between science and faith here. The point of these stories is that God brought all of this into being, not how God accomplished it. If God wanted to creatively take billions of years and bring all of this into being, I have no problem with that. And creation is ongoing, by the way.

So in the first story of creation, it's like one of those days that goes really well. God speaks, and it happens. Day one: God says, Let there be light, and it happens. And God says, It's good.

Day two: Let there be a separation between the waters above and the waters below. God creates sky, and it's good. And on and on, every day until God creates four-footed creatures and two footed-creatures on the same day, and God says, It's very good! In that first account of creation, God speaks, and it happens. It feels like one of those great days.

The second story feels different. First of all, when things begin, it seems that there is already some dry land, with a spring coming up out of it. And then God right off the bat creates a man. There is a man before there is a garden. And this is not: God-speaks-and-it-happens kind of creation. This is God reaching down into the mud and getting dirty, and forming the first human being out of the clay. God is a sculptor, whose hands get clay all over them.

And then God uses CPR. God bends down and breathes life into this first human being. God doesn't just speak from a distance; God gets really intimate here. So in the Hebrew view, a human is not body and soul, a human is a living being; animated flesh. God gives life. And God wants to be in relationship with this human being.

So first there is life...and then God places the first human in a location: life, and then location. God plants a garden. God transitions from Sculptor to Gardener. God calls it the Garden of Eden, which means, the Garden of Delight. We each get placed in a location, don't we? Sometimes we struggle where we are placed. The first five years of my ministry I struggled in the place God had located me. It wasn't a garden of delight, it was a garden of challenges. But I had lessons to learn. God gives us life, and then God places us in a location. God locates us in a family, in a neighborhood, in a school, in a place of work, God places us in retirement. God says, I have a purpose for you here.

And then God gives the first human a vocation: life, location, vocation. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it." The Hebrew here means *to serve the land*. That is different than to dominate the land; that is different than to beat the land into submission. No, we are called to serve the land. There is a loving relationship there.

Then God says, You may eat of any tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, I don't want you to eat. In the first story, it's all good! In this account, God says, Nope, that's not good for you. But, you ask, Doesn't God want the man to know about good and evil? Of course. I believe what is happening here is that God is saying: I'm the only One who truly knows good and evil. You humans will always only have partial knowledge. "We see in a mirror dimly," as Paul says. And if we thought we had complete knowledge of what is good and what is evil, we would spend our time judging others, calling them evil, and we do that enough anyway, don't we? So God symbolically says, No, I don't want you eating from that tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I will be the judge, not you.

Then God says, It's not good....In the first account, God says over and over, It is good. Now God says, It is not good....that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner.

Now, don't misunderstand this. Sometimes we hear this, and we think, Oh, God makes Adam a "little helper." No, the Hebrew word *ezer* means a partner, one who comes alongside of. Sixteen times in the Hebrew Bible, when the word helper is

used, it refers to God. God is my helper. God is not a subordinate to us. God is not “my little helper.” God is a partner with us, a helper.

God says, You need someone to help you, to be complementary to you: someone who balances you out; someone who makes your heart sing; someone who helps you be more the person God created you to be. You know when you’ve met that person.

Here’s where the story has some fun. “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 each living creature, that was its name.²⁰ 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.”

We can picture this: God brings an elephant before Adam, and Adam says, If that elephant rolled over in its sleep, I’d be toast. God brings a cheetah before Adam, and Adam says, I just couldn’t keep up. God brings a snail before Adam, and Adam says, I really do want a partner I can walk with. Adam says, None of these will do. But I will name each one.

Here’s another place where this story feels different; God is trying some things out. God says, What about this? What about that? Could this work? We think of the way God works in history. God gives the law to the people of Israel, and says, Let’s try this relationship. And it doesn’t work very well. They struggle.

God sends prophets to call the people back into relationship with God. They ignore them. God says: Let’s try this. I’m sending you off into captivity. They learn some lessons, but when they come back, the religious leaders make sure the laws are even tighter than before, so they won’t get in trouble again.

Then God says, I really need to visit this planet in a special way; so God comes in Jesus to live out grace and mercy and forgiveness. In this second story of creation, God says, Let’s try this. Sometimes it feels to me that life is more like that than the first story, where God speaks, and my goodness, it happens. Lickity split. I find my life more often like the second story of creation. Life is more complicated, and God is working thorough all of life’s circumstances.

Here is another difference: in the first account of creation, God does everything. This is light, this is day and night, this is sun and moon. In this second story, God moves over a bit, and Adam is a co-creator. Adam names the animals. Adam has some power.

Well, it turns out none of these animals is right for Adam, and so God puts Adam in a deep sleep, and the Sculptor turned Gardener turns Surgeon. Out of Adam's side God makes the first woman, a partner for Adam. And when Adam is in the recovery room, and sees Eve, he says, "This at last in bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."

The Hebrew really means: This is it! This is the real deal! Now, the creation accounts have been used by people to say, Well, here is the order of creation- male and female. That's what God created. Any other kind of intimate relationship that does not involve male and female is against God's will.

Remember that these are ancient people giving us a view of the world that they understood. We 21st century people understand that sexual orientation and gender identity are much more complicated.

Austen Hartke, in their book, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*, describes creation this way. The Hebrews saw things in a binary way. So when God creates, there is light and dark, there is sun and moon, there is land and sea, there is male and female. It is either or. It is dualistic. This or that. And yet, the heavens declare the glory of God not just with sun and moon, but with stars and black holes and supernovas and planets. God creates a wide variety of heavenly creations, and says, It is good!

And God doesn't just create seas or dry land, either/or, this or that. God creates spaces that are neither land nor sea: there are marshes; there are peat bogs; there are wetlands. Topography is much more complicated than either sea or land. God creates this diversity. Why wouldn't it be so with who we are attracted to, or not attracted to? With how we express our sexual orientation or gender identity?

I believe the truth of this story is that God places us into life-giving relationships! Sometimes in life we are fortunate to find that one who helps us be the person God created us to be. We find that person and commit ourselves to that person and the

whole is greater than the sum of the parts. And we say with Adam: This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. Even if we are not partnered, God gives us friends, and a church community, and neighbors, and classmates. God places us in relationships. We are not meant to be alone.

And remember, God doesn't just place us into relationship with each other: God places us into relationship with the whole of creation! And God is enfleshed in all of creation! I will leave you with a little taste of the contemplative service for tonight. Listen to this quote from Sam Keen, who shares that we experience the presence of God in all things. God has placed us in the garden to be in relationship with all things, and our vocation is to serve creation. "The Logos, the Word...that informs the cosmos- all things great and small- is still spoken in sparrow song, wind sigh, and leaf fall. An electron is a single letter, an atom a complex word, a molecule a sentence, and a mockingbird an entire epistle in the great ongoing saga. The ocean still whispers the song that originated with the big bang. Listen to the longing in your heart for love and justice, and you may hear the sacred word. To live in a reverential manner is...to create an autobiography in which we tell the stories of the unique epiphanies that have informed our lives." –Sam Keen, *In the Absence of God*

May God awaken us this day to the reality that God we are in relationship with all things! And God has set us in the garden to serve.

Now we know that chapter three will come- Adam and Eve will give into the temptation to go their own way. It's a part of the story that says that we will make choices that do not please God. We will turn our own direction; we will spoil our relationships and we will spoil this garden. But God does not give up on us: God offers forgiveness and new life in Christ. God gives us life this new day. God places us in a location this day...and God gives us a vocation this day: in the name of Jesus, to be a blessing to the world. Amen.