

Sermon: A Love Story  
Text: Genesis 2  
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Context: WWPC  
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*Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone . . .*

“The universe is made up of stories, not atoms.” It’s not the stuff of hard science to be sure, but it is the kind of claim a poet would make, especially one who is well versed in her Old Testament. “The universe is made up of stories, not atoms.”

And sure enough, the quote comes from Muriel Rukeyser, the American poet, the Jewish American poet. But I heard it first from David Lose.

I’ve mentioned David’s name before. He’s the President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

Along with Walter Brueggeman, David was one of the keynote speakers at the Festival of Homiletics, which I attended in Atlanta last month.

I mention this because David is responsible for what we are about to do. At the Festival he gave a lecture centered on the role of story in scripture, and suggesting ways we pastors and preachers might bring stories more centrally into our preaching.

As many of know, narrative is something I’ve lately become increasingly interested in. So I bit.

And the short of it is that, listening to David’s lecture, I decided on the spot that I wanted to do a summer sermon series that follows the narrative arc of the Old Testament. (So let me immediately say that if you don’t like this idea—please direct your complaints to David, not me!)

And so, naturally, the proper place to launch such a series is at the very beginning, with the story of creation. Except that in keeping with good narrative theory, I wanted there to be a twist.

When we think of the story of creation as it comes to us in the Bible, most of us naturally think of Genesis chapter 1. The passage is so famous, so foundational, so familiar, that most of us can quote parts of it from memory:

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth . . . And God said, let there be light and there was light. Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And on the seventh day, God rested from all his work.*

The language of this story is so familiar it’s in our bones. It’s also in our lectionary, which is also in part why it’s in our bones. It comes our way every three years.

Not so with Genesis 2. It’s not in our bones so much. In part – and this, too, may come as something of a surprise – because it’s not in our lectionary. There may be other reasons which also help explain its secondary status, and we’ll come back to those in a moment.

Obviously we all recognize some of the names and places that appear in the story: Eve and the Garden of Eden, for example.

But unless you’re a conscientious student of the Bible, or you read scripture recreationally or devotionally, then there’s a pretty good chance you may not have heard this story before, at least not in full, not the way it was meant to be heard.

Which is a shame because things get juicy right away. If we take the kind of compare and contrast approach we learned in ninth grade, some fascinating findings emerge right away.

For example, if you ever want definitive proof that the writers and editors of the Bible were less interested in empirical truth than theological truth, or proof that the Bible’s internal details are often sharply at odds with one another, you need look no further than the two creation stories with which Genesis opens.

Together these two creation narratives are Exhibit A in the fight against fundamentalism. For these two accounts of creation are irreconcilably different in their chronologies and in their specific accounts of how the world and everything on it came to be, including us.

One hand Genesis 1 reads like poetry – In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (or, as the Hebrew more accurately reads, In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth.)

That language sounds like something John Donne might have written, or Muriel Rukeyser.

But, curiously, after that magisterial opening, the story that follows is so well-ordered, so rationally structured, it sounds like something from the Presbyterian Book of Order.

Day one: Let there be light and there was light.

Day two: Sky

Day three: Water and land.

Day four: Sun and moon. (Admittedly these two celestial orbs emerge after light was created on day one, but remember, the Bible is not so concerned with factual details.)

Day five: Fish, birds, animals.

And finally, on day six: Us.

*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,* the divine voice announces.

Here in Genesis one, humanity as a race takes center stage in the creation story. We are the pinnacle of creation, the very last thing God makes to cap off the whole generative exercise. What begins with the stars ends with human beings.

That said, it's a surprisingly generalized account. There is no mention of any one specific human. No mention of Adam or Eve by name, just the idea that, as creatures, we are made male and female.

And no reference to the specific stuff out of which we are made, no dust, no mud, no breath; only the affirmation that we are created in the divine image, leaving the reader to wonder, are we made of light, or love, or something even more mysterious?

It's such a perfect story: pure and idyllic, rational and orderly, simple but comprehensive, short but wide-ranging, stretching from the vault of the heavens to the precincts of human beings.

And maybe that's the problem. Maybe it's a little too perfect. Because as the headlines this morning reminded us, with their news of yet another mass shooting, this one in Orlando, the world in which we live is far from pure and idyllic.

And our own lives certainly don't unfold in nice orderly fashion. Sure there are joyful events and pleasant occasions: marriages and births, graduations and reunions, lively holidays and fun-filled vacations.

But there are also crashes and upsets, betrayals and divorces, accidents and injuries, diagnoses and setbacks. Frankly, it sometimes feels like life unfolds more like something from a Stephen King novel than from the Book of Order.

Maybe that's why we have a second creation story. Because we need one that's a bit grittier than the first version.

From the opening line, this second account reads less like poetry and more like a user's manual prepared by the Department of Agriculture. It's clunky sounding, and it starts not with light but with dust.

*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.*

Here humankind is not the pinnacle of creation. Instead one guy is the very first thing that is made. We know him as Adam, from the Hebrew word for human.

But unlike his human counterparts in chapter one, Adam was not made in the divine image. Adam was made out of the earth itself.

Before there is a light in the sky, before rain had started to fall on the ground, before there was a plant, or a fish or a bird or a bug, there was only this one man, walking around naked, hungry and alone, and presumably in the dark.

Obviously this will not do, not if you're God and not if you want this new race of beings to outlive this one solitary man.

Which is when the story turns from a creation drama to a children's comedy. After plopping Adam down in the Garden of Eden, God then goes to incredible lengths to solve the problem of Adam's loneliness.

In a story we'll come back to next week, God first creates the entire animal kingdom, then parades these newly minted creatures past Adam, not as potential food sources but as potential mates.

Rhino, no. Giraffe, no. Platypus, no.

Little wonder that the story doesn't appear in the lectionary. As creation accounts go, it is so primitive it's almost embarrassing.

Which is why I wonder if maybe we're reading it wrong, whether reading it in this way is to miss the main point it's trying to make. It's not primarily a creation story, it's a story about relationship.

First our relationship to the earth and its creatures, centered on our call to tend the earth lovingly, like God does, which is to say not like greedy opportunists but like gardeners.

But even more than that, in the end it's a love story. God causes a deep sleep to fall over Adam, extricates a rib and from that bone, God creates Eve, a partner made from Adam and specifically for him.

Adam wakes, takes one look at Eve and thinks, *Well now. Finally, here is one like me. We are different, but we are the same.* As the text puts it:

*"This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh.:"*

We've learned a lot since the creation stories in Genesis were compiled. Science has given us a whole different account of creation, about a universe made not out of stories but atoms. We now know how galaxies were formed. We know the atomic elements and nuclear processes that cause the sun to burn, and how animals came to be.

We also now know a lot more about gender and identity today than did the writers of the Bible did back in their day. Even if it's hard for some of us to understand, it's clear that gender and sexual identity are not fixed, or simple.

And from our own experience, or the experience of people we love and care about, we also know that marriage is not perfect. We know that what makes a relationship last is love, not gender. That what makes it sacred is not anatomy but what I call covenantal factors: mutuality and faithfulness over time.

Which is perhaps why this second account of creation is, at heart, a love story. Because the larger story that is about to unfold in the pages of scripture is a hard one.

As we'll see in the coming weeks, it's filled with crashes and upsets, floods and disasters, stolen birthrights and stolen wives. Really, the Old Testament reads more like something out of *Game of Thrones* than like something from the Book of Order.

Which is also to say, despite the Bible's antiquity and its scientific naiveté, its stories still sound a lot like life today.

And what was true in the beginning is still true: it is better not to face these crashes and upsets alone.

Whether in the company of a single spouse or partner, or the company of an entire congregation, that is, the company of a family of loved ones and friends, it is better to live this story of life together. This ongoing story of creation.

Thanks be to God.