

Working Together
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
September 8, 2019

Genesis 2:4b-19

Today is a day of beginnings.

As a congregation, we launch a new program year with new faith formation, fellowship, service and worship opportunities for people of all ages. Students and teachers have returned to predictable academic schedules. And there's a bite in the air, signaling a new season in the natural world.

So it makes sense that our scriptural text for today is found at the beginning.

Not the very beginning, mind you. In Genesis 1, as the story goes, God speaks into being earth and sky, sun and moon, lobster and lemming, apples and broccoli, even you and me, in God's own image.

And when God was finished and saw that all of creation was very, very good, God rested to enjoy everything that had been made. And God even gave a blessing to the time of resting and called it sabbath.

Today's scripture is a second creation story. Some biblical scholars think it predates the first. In some ways, this second story flows from the first, as if the narrative is saying, *"Before we get ahead of ourselves, let's spend some more time back on the sixth day when humans were created. Listen up, folks, this part is important."*

But there's also a bit of narrative dissonance between the two. In Genesis 1, God speaks and creation happens. In Genesis 2, God forms 'adam out of the adamah, the human out of the dust. Think of a sculptor or, better yet, a child at play, forming something out of the mud.

In Genesis 1, God creates everything, including all animals, as a way of preparing for humans. On the sixth day, the creation of human beings seems to be positioned as God's crowning achievement.

But in Genesis 2, God creates the humble human from the dirt and dust and mud from the ground, then quickly feels sorry for it, and creates animals as potential companions.

In Genesis 1, God creates humanity as a partnership, male and female God creates them, both in God's own image.

But in Genesis 2, God creates one human, then another out of the first.

Maybe two stories are better than one, for they represent a dialogue rather than a monologue, a variety of perspectives rather than a single imperial point of view.

Sometimes Christians like to talk about this story as if humanity was the result of one big mistake. God made this great world with this beautiful garden and only gave us ONE RULE to follow, and what did we do?

We broke it! That's right. And everything that's bad or evil in the world thereby extends from our inability to follow the rules.

I think, though, reading this story again, we might find something quite different, if we look a little closer.

Imagine God squatting down close to the earth and scooping together a little pile of damp dirt and kind of patting it and forming it into something that God sort of likes, as a young child would do with a can of play-dough. And then bending down and taking a big breath, and breathing life into this mud creature. I can see the lungs suddenly rise as the air enters them. The creature is animated by God: given life and soul.

From the very beginning, humanity is constructed as fragile, fallible, nothing perfect. Just a clay figure, made with hands. And into that clay, God breathes life.

So what does this say about who we humans are?

It says that we're fundamentally tied to the earth, made from the earth.

But we're also stretched between two realms, because as much as we're tied to the earth, we're also tied to the Creator through God's own breath.

We're part dirt and part breath.

We're both earthly and of the Divine I AM.

We're a melding of two things that are both fundamentally good, but also fundamentally different.

There's tension and dissonance in that... that was part of the design from the very beginning.

Tension and dissonance is also part of the landscaping of this garden God has planted, for in it, we are told, are two trees. One is the tree of life, the other, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And God says that the human, the 'adam, should not eat from the second one.

Why?

It seems that the most dangerous thing in all creation – perhaps the only dangerous thing in all creation – is the knowledge of good and evil.

According to Genesis 2, that kind of knowledge is meant for God alone, the one who forms all the creatures of the earth and is formed by no other.

The problem is... in knowing the difference between good and evil, we are put in a place of predicament. Because that is the kind of knowledge that can lead to us making judgement calls. And when we start judging some aspects of creation as better than others, we start playing God.

And if we humans start playing God, how long will it take before we decide this person or tribe is good and deserves to live, but that person or tribe is evil and deserves what's coming to them?

If we humans start playing God, how long will it take before we judge that one species of animal is good and deserves to survive, but that other one is worthless and can be exploited and driven to the edge of extinction?

If we humans start playing God, how long until we judge this land is good and deserves to be preserved, but that river that belongs to my neighbor over there is without value and can be plundered, polluted, or poisoned?

When we eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, we start playing God, we create anxiety and greed and bigotry and distrust and gossip and protectiveness.

Of course, we know that tree is there for a reason. It's a little bit like that old rule of playwriting, that if there's a stage with two doors, and one of the doors hasn't been used, you just know that somebody's going to come out that second door by the end of the play.

The tree has been planted there with purpose. Not to tempt humanity or trick us into a fatal mistake, but to represent the two realms we live between: the realms of life and death.

Being human means holding a fruit from each of those trees in the palm of each hand. Each piece has a bite taken out of it. Every day we get to decide which one we are going to continue eating.

Eating the fruit is part of the architecture of this story. It reminds us that we're balanced between two poles. Eden was never quite enough.

Of course, we know that the notion of trees as a source of life and death is not limited to this story. Jesus is nailed to a tree, a tree that is the tool of death but the doorway to life. In the midst of suffering, he hangs between the two. As God's children, God's creatures, we find our whole lives hanging between these two realms: life and death.

We were made that way.

Just a little bit of dirt and breath, earth and stardust.

I've often found it painful to look into the eyes of someone I love dearly and see reflected that mixture of dirt and breath.

I see glimpses of God in that person I love, but I also see all the rest, their pain and challenges.

I see someone who is both holy and broken, perfect and cracked, God's beloved child and earth's ancestor.

And all of it, the dirt and the clay and the cracks, is very good.

We were brought up from the ground to go back to the ground, shaped by God's hands, enlivened by God's breath, and eventually returned to God's tender embrace.

This is the stuff of this creation story – just one of the tales we tell about who we really are.

But what this all mean for us, here and now?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus looks at his disciples and the crowd and says, *"Don't worry about your life."*

With these words, he is putting all of them, and us, back in the garden.

"God will provide for you," he says. *"Look at the flowers and the plums and the strawberries and the hummingbirds and the wasps."*

They're all doing their thing, tending and tilling their little part of the garden. Fully alive because they are fully themselves. Even Solomon - gaudy, self-involved, golden King Solomon - in all his splendor, is not decked out like a single one of these garden dwellers.

Trust in God to provide what you need and what your neighbor needs and what the world needs. Trust in the ultimate goodness of creation and leave the judgment of good and evil to God, who continues to guide and provide, to curb and instruct, to create and destroy, to pluck and to plant.”

Our work together as the church, in this season and every season, is to tend and till, to care and companion, to be washed in the waters of the river of life, to eat at the table of abundance, and to choose again and again the way of love.

Look at your hands... God will use these hands to share tenderness.

Look at your feet... God will use these feet to create new paths.

Close your eyes and put your hand over your heart... God will use this heart to fill the world with love.

Look out those beautiful, tall and clear windows at God's world... this is where we are sent to serve.

This is what it means to be human, and what it means to be church. Amen.