

Three notes before I begin: 1st, some of the ideas that make up this sermon come from workingpreacher.org's commentary on this lectionary reading, and I'm not necessarily going to cite those specifically. Thus, if I say anything particularly smart, assume I got it from the commentary. 2nd, Genesis presents a heterosexual relationships as normative, and this sermon will not take on that assumption. Instead, I'm going to focus on the idea of partnership. 3rd, this sermon is the product of an English major, twice over in fact. I can't help myself sometimes.

I get to preach from the first few chapters of Genesis! This is the stuff that began John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost* has these parts in it where people go to different levels for different sins with illicit love being one of the lowest levels, lower than gluttony, for example. No part of the Old Testament is as ripe mythologically as Genesis. It explains humans and how we came to be. It unveils how our world came to be (and an emphasis on **our world**, as in human's). And it describes human's *fall from grace*, thus, why we have so many troubles. It even has a convenient fall guy, actually a fall **girl**, in Eve.

We'll look at this part of Genesis as a myth--a *story*--but very important story. According to Joseph Campbell, the secular saint of all things myth-related, myths have a variety of functions common across human societies.

One of these is to explain the universe & how things (especially *humans*) came to be. So who is this Adam who seems to be so "special" in the eyes of God? We'll take another look at the scriptures' language: we will learn that Adam was as common as dirt—literally.

Myths **also** have a **societal** function. That is, myths tell us what our roles are in the social order. If you are thinking ahead, you might be reacting to how scriptures tell us that woman called Eve is to be subservient to her man. (Sounds like a country and Western song except "subservient" has too many syllables.) Be patient: we'll go there, but we might leave by a route different than you expect.

The last proposition we'll look at is the **instructional** purpose of myth; in other words, how myths tell to go about our business. You might wonder: what am I supposed to learn from the forbidden fruit story? We'll go there last.

Why is this Genesis story important to folks in the Judeo-Christian tradition? Myths cut to the chase. They strip away a lot of complications so we can see the essentials—in this case, *humans; *human's relationship to each other and *humans' relationship to the larger world. And we better get that last relationship right *soon*, now that the 21st century is only a fifth gone, but this blue ball we're riding on might not be blue much longer.

If we look at the story of Adam through 21st century eyes, we might discover a more earthy story, and I mean *earthy* as in *dirt*, the very stuff that gets under our nails. We read in Genesis that Adam is *of* the earth; Adam is made out of earth, made out of *Adamah*, to use the Hebrew. My birth certificate calls me *Steven*. You call me *Steve*. Same thing: *Adamah* and *Adam*.

Not only is Adam made of earth, but so are the other living things. Going a little further in Genesis than today's lectionary, we learn in Genesis 2, verse 9, that God then makes the plants grow out of the same ground that gave birth to Adam. Now, this chronology might be a bit backwards given what we know of evolution. But myths don't get graded on their literal truth. The point is this: there is nothing unique about Adam-stuff. We are the same ingredients as the rest of the critters that swim, fly, crawl and gallop. We are the same clay. We've got no special status just because we get to walk around on two legs and balance big bobbling heads. We're as common as dirt.

Back to Joe Campbell: he maintains that humans wonder how we came to be and from what. Genesis's first few chapters, like countless other myths, includes a birthing story. In many myths the first human is lifted out of the ground or pulled from the waters or dropped from the heavens or rescued from a nest. The Hebrew story is much like the others.

Over the years we've made a big deal out of the idea that mankind has *dominion over* the earth, according to Genesis. Let's look at that. One of the *Living Bible* commentators tells us that the verb *abad* has connotations of worship and of serving. It's not so much that Man is supposed to **use** the earth at his whim, but rather that humans should enter into a **worshipful, symbiotic** relationship with the world. To quote Theodore Hiebert's *The Yahwist's Landscape*, "Genesis 2 pictures the human's role not as ruler but as *groundskeeper* or *tenant farmer*." And several other books in the Old Testament— Deuteronomy; 2 Samuel; Zechariah; and Isaiah—"do nothing to suggest a relationship of rule or even ownership in relation to the ground." Here's my take on that idea: we're part of the planet, like the lungs or heart are part of the human body. We're not any more special than the other parts. We have a job to do, and it's a caretaking job. We're here to help this earth prosper on *its terms*.

Next let's talk about women. More properly, about men *and* women. That part of the creation myth that really hits our modern sensibilities in the gut, this supposed hierarchy of men and **then** women. Genesis tells us that man came first and that women were to be men's helpers.

If we look at these verses with a linguist's eye, we might find a different read. Going a little further in Genesis than today's lectionary, we find Adam exclaiming in verse 23, chapter 2: "This at last is bone of my bone/ Flesh of my flesh." That certainly reduces, if not eliminates, any assumed hierarchy between Eve and Adam. And scripture makes it clear that the word "helper" doesn't necessarily refer to an inferior. In Psalms 33: 20 the psalmist exclaims: "O God!/ You are my helper and deliverer." See, a *helper* is no *lucky*. That "helper" is more like the rescuer who tosses a drowning man a lifeline or a banker who gives somebody a needed loan. In this context, Adam and Eve are equals, perhaps with different jobs, who labor *together*.

This made me think of Kathy Witzenburg who served as my *administrative assistant* at Simpson for 21 years. The term "assistant" might have been in Kathy's job title, but the truth is that Kathy (air quotes) "was assistant" to 15 or so faculty, and so she was much more

important than any *one* of us educated Wallace Hall eggheads. We faculty talked about an idea; Kathy got *'er done!*

This got me thinking about the many farmwives I've known, both here and in Nebraska. A common division today in family farming is for the male to serve as the chief laborer and straw boss while the woman is the financial brain of the operation. The man kept the farm machinery running, supervised the helpers needed for harvest, and so on. The woman is the chief financial officer. She kept the books, prepared the taxes, and determined the budget. As much as her husband might want a new truck or tractor, it is the *woman* who crunches the numbers and informs Straw Hat Joe if their enterprise could afford the machinery, or if he needed to gather up more baling wire and patch up the existing equipment.

Does this take on Genesis *dissolve* the idea of inequality between the sexes? No. But if we remember Joe Campbell, we see that the sociological function of this myth is much more fluid and affirming of women's worth than we usually give **Genesis** credit for.

Then there's that part of the creation story that has always puzzled me the most. That's the bit about the tree of knowledge and human's uninvited consumption of its fruit, the bit about God getting mad and casting us out of the garden. The commentary I read makes a big deal out of this act of rebellion, how it portrays humans going from a *theological* understanding of the world to a *human* understanding. We gained the knowledge of good and evil, and, guess what, it's now our job to follow through because we aren't like little kids who can just do what they please, not understanding the consequences. We've got to be good, now that we know the difference.

The **instructional** purpose of this myth warns us *to get a handle on ourselves*. Humans with our big brains have a way of perceiving that only allow us to see *immediate, self-serving* advantages. Take the popularity of the internal combustion engine, the ubiquitous plastic containers that have a half-life of 1,000 years or more, (on a side note, a whale was recently found near Finland with plastic containers from four different continents in its gut), the practice of harvesting organs without an ethical system for their distribution, and, most immediately, the polyglot of communication tools where we can broadcast anything and generally get away with it.

Now we're talking here about Campbell's *third* purpose for myth—that our myths should instruct us on the most serious of matters, issues where often we can't see the end result. To mix my myths, we now live with a Pandora's Box of knowledge, and we open the lid without thinking it through. Our appetite, not our wisdom, is still the prime force in the decisions we make. Stupid and gluttonous humans that we are, we often haven't a clue how we are going to rein in those powerful forces once they're released.

Is it progress that allows us to take a finite resource like fossil fuel and squander it making plastic containers and fueling jet planes for intercontinental getaways? Is it real information when someone in power can tweet a half-formed thought and millions of followers adopt it as gospel? And is it real information when someone spends beaucoup time and money to *refute* that tweet, and yet when they *also* fail to tell the full truth?

We might have been commanded to leave the Garden, but we are making the Wilderness less and less a place that living beings can call home. I'm not just talking about our soil, water and air that we're defiling; I'm also talking the ideas we breath in, the social media posts we put up, and the incivility we exchange when we are in the commons of ideas.

So back to the idea of myths. They can be truer than facts, that is, their essential ideas supersede a literalness. Is there a literal garden of Eden? Science tells us that we've looked for the Garden for thousands of years with no luck. Let's focus on what are we doing *with* the wilderness? Look around you. As posh as our homes and cars and communications systems may be, this world is a frightening place, and I for one get more scared every time I access the news.

We, when compared to the other *Godly* critters on the planet, have the power to keep the earth green and the oceans blue. It seems to me that we're glad to take possession of the property, but we don't want to keep the smoke stack clean and the yard weeded. The myth of Genesis tells us that humans are to live in *partnership*, like Eve and Adam. How can we make that myth live, not just our families and friendships, but in the workplace and the commons?

Let's remember, this part of Genesis is rightfully called the creation story. What Genesis story are we authoring in the 21st century?

What will our descendants label these two centuries where most of us have been alive? I pray fervently that the span of my life—half way through last century into who knows how far in this one—will not be marked by history as the Great Destruction or the Great Decline.

And on that cheery note, let us listen to our prayer hymn and sing along to if you wish.

Benediction

God of creation, thank you for the ground beneath our feet and the planets around us, and planets we do not yet know.

Thank you for the partnerships we form to do Your work. Help us to remember to carry our fair share of the work, and, just as much, help us talk to each other and agree how that work is to be divided.

Thank you for our collective conscience. Help us revere it as a gift and remember that only when we are *guilty* is our conscience a *burden*.