

## Why Are We Here?

Texts: Genesis 2:1-9, 15-23; Exodus 20:8-11

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 30, 2020*

Genesis 2 is different from Genesis 1 on several fronts. First, the style of literature changes. Genesis 1 is an epic poem and Genesis 2 is a folksy narrative. Next, the order in which things are created and the reasons for creating them are different in the two accounts. If you bought into the “humans are the pinnacle of all creation” interpretation that comes from people being created last in Genesis 1, you’re in for a rude surprise in Genesis 2. Here people are created first because God won’t send rain to make all the plants grow until there’s someone on staff to pull the weeds. More on that later; but if you found your head swelling with all the talk of being made in God’s image and having dominion over everything in Genesis 1, your throne is pulled out from under you by Genesis 2:5.

There’s also some overlap in the two chapters. Both stories show us a Creator God, but God is much more hands-on in Genesis 2. In Genesis 1 God speaks things into being, but in Genesis 2, God is right there, down in the dirt, shaping and breathing and planting and giving sleeping potions, and doing surgery. God is personally and physically involved here, adding to our understanding of who God is and what we might expect from the God of Israel in the story going forward. Would God ever, you know, show up in person on the earth in some way? Is that the sort of thing this God would do? That’s not clear in Genesis 1, but by Genesis 2 there is no question.

And while God in Genesis 1 seems to have everything all planned out and scripted, God in Genesis 2 has problems—like who will pull the weeds and what sort of help does Adam need—and figures Creation out almost on the fly. There’s trial and error. Hmmm, how will I get help for Adam? Armadillos? No. Dragonflies? Apparently not. Dogs? Surely dogs. No? How did a dog not work? Every one of the animals is made and **none** of them is the perfect blend of partner and help in the huge task God laid out for Adam. Maybe the idea came from watching the amoebas divide, but God sends Adam for a nap, figures he won’t miss a rib, and God finally solves the problem. Genesis 1 teaches us that God has plans; Genesis 2 teaches us that even God’s plans shift and change as circumstances warrant.

There are also two important truths that both stories share. The first is the affirmation that, whether people come first or last in the order of creation, we are made of the same stuff as everything else. Humans are part of the created order and are share that same substance. In Genesis 1 that substance is water and in Genesis 2 that substance is the ground; but everything comes from the same source in both stories.

Genesis 2 makes that even more plain. While the English typically translates the Hebrew word *Adam* as “man,” it’s not the word for a male human. If your name is Adam you probably already know this, but the name literally means “red earth” and is the Hebrew word for a human being—men and women both. It was used in Genesis 1, too, but there we didn’t see God scooping up the earth and physically forming a body at the same time. The extra visual in Genesis 2 brings that message home.

In the Hebrew Bible you can’t talk about being human without saying the word for ground—soil—earth. There is no us and them when it comes to anything God created. What is done to any of it is done to all of it. It’s another way to understand the depth of what Jesus may have meant when he said so famously, “Whatever you have done to the least of these, you have done unto me.” The Hebrew Bible was Jesus’ Bible. These are the stories he learned from and later taught. We should expect to see them in layers underneath his life and teaching. What we do to anything else in the created order we do to ourselves. It’s right there in Adam’s name.

The second truth we find affirmed in both stories is that God shares power and authority, even in the very act of creating the world itself. In Genesis 1, that took the form of God pulling back and merely telling the earth to produce vegetation and then letting the ground grow whatever it felt like. The same with the oceans and all the creatures of the sea. God did not micromanage that process in Genesis 1.

In this chapter, the message isn't as obvious, **unless** you were one of the earliest people to hear this story. These stories were passed along as part of oral tradition, probably for more than a thousand years before writing was even invented. So, we're inside the heads of people from the ancient Near East somewhere between 5-7 thousand years ago. Knowing how they thought is a tall order. So, when I was writing the *Exploring the Bible* series, I did a deep dive into what scholars know about how people back then thought about the world, and I came across something fascinating with ties to both of these creation stories.

For those of us in the West, we have thought—at least since the Enlightenment—that for something to exist, it had to have mass. That is, it had to be a material substance. If you could sit on it, squash it, or stub your toe on it, then it plainly existed. Because, I mean, there it is! But people haven't always thought like that. For a person in the ancient Near East, nothing truly existed unless it checked three boxes: First: The thing had to be separate and distinct from other things. Second: The thing had to have an identified function. And Third: The thing had to have a name. Until you could check all three of those boxes, it did not formally exist.

Knowing that, you can go back and see those things built just like a formula into each day of creation in Genesis 1. When you realize the way they thought back then, the primordial soup of Genesis 1:1 would have been exactly the confirmation they needed that nothing existed. It was “formless.” You couldn't distinguish anything from anything else, which made it fail the first box on the existence test. That whole first verse was code for “nothing at all.” And then the poem proceeds with light being distinguished from dark and land from water and on it goes. And each thing is carefully named and we learn what it's for.

With that understanding, we come into Genesis 2 and what I used to see as a fun kids' story about Adam naming all the animals gets way more interesting. Remember the boxes they needed to qualify as existing: 1. You had to be able to tell it apart from other things, 2. You had to know what it was for, and 3. It had to have a name. A name, you say? It doesn't actually exist until it has a name? God bringing the animals to Adam is suddenly way more than a fun story about coming up with a name for the duck-billed platypus. Letting Adam give the animals their names was God inviting the first human to participate in the act of creation.

When people talk about people being co-creators with God, that's sometimes seen as some new-fangled bit of theology that doesn't have biblical support. But in fact, it's an idea that is as ancient as the text itself. And it affirms what we learned in Genesis 1 about the nature of God. This is a God who shares power and authority, not with other gods in a pantheon like the gods of Babylon or Egypt, but with lowly humans that are literally made of dirt.

Those are the truths the stories share, but there are also two *new* things that Genesis 2 gives us as the story of the world moves forward.

The first new thing is that we finally hear God call something “not good.” Everything in Genesis 1 was “good” or “very good.” Here, in Genesis 2:18 we hear the first thing that is “not good” and that thing is being alone. The worldview of the Bible is not that of the rugged individualist. It's not the world of pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. It's a world where you need help and God calls it “not good” if you don't have the help that you need. Wherever we have gotten the idea that everyone should be able to go it alone in this world, it wasn't from the Bible. In both the Old and New Testaments, the goal of everything is a loving and healthy community. In the Bible, we are only encouraged to focus on “me” as an individual because that will make things better for “us” as a group.

You can see that idea in the language as God makes the animals. God is specifically trying to find Adam a “helper.” And, lest you think that the fact he ends up with Eve means she has to don an apron and cook dinner for him, the Hebrew word for “helper” in that verse is the same one used to describe God's help in places like Psalm 121 where it says, “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Biblically, Eve is a helper in the way God is a helper. If you still think that justifies the subjugation of women, well, let's just say you're going to need all of God's help when you show up at the pearly gates.

Genesis 2 teaches us that we're all in this together, as helpers for each other, because we're made in the image of God, who is also our help. We give and we receive; each a channel of God's help from one to the other. The cycle of giving and receiving that we saw Jacob mess up a few weeks ago is how God's community is built and maintained. Without both parts, the giving and receiving, we drift into factions and war as Jacob and Esau's descendants did. God says it's "not good" for us to go it alone. We need each other; God made the world that way on purpose. That's the first new thing.

The second new thing in Genesis 2 is what brings human beings fully into existence. Remember our check boxes? God separates Adam from the ground, and he is named for the red earth from which he is formed. But Mr. Red Earth doesn't yet have a function—a purpose—and he can't be said to exist without one. What is the role of this new creature? This human? We find it in Genesis 2:15: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." The Hebrew word translated as "till" here means to serve and the Hebrew word for "keep," means to protect. The purpose God gave to the first human being was to serve and protect the world. And the second human being? Her job was to help him do it. None of the animals were suitable for that job. It was only the humans—male and female. Serve and protect all the rest. That's the human calling, the human purpose, the human vocation. All the rest of the stories of the Bible will give us more details on how to do that well and what happens when we don't, but here at the outset the basics are laid out. Serve and protect the world. And with that purpose established for human beings—for Adam and Eve and all who came after—our creation was complete.

Lest you think I'm making too much of this verse, remember that I believe the Bible is to be read as a story, which means important themes are introduced early and then picked up later by repeating key words, circumstances, and settings. So, before we finish, fast forward to Moses presenting the Ten Commandments to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. Jump down a few commandments to the one about Sabbath. You'll notice that the Sabbath commandment also directly references creation as the reason that commandment exists. God worked for six days and then rested for one, so we who are made in God's image should do the same.

And when the Sabbath commandment says we should labor for six days and do all our work, guess what the word is for "labor?" It's the same as the word for "till" in Adam's job in Genesis. In Hebrew the word is *abad*, and its most basic meaning is service. Genesis 2:15 is the very first time in the Bible the word appears. Even more, it's actually the root of the Hebrew word for worship. In the Bible, service is at the root of all worship, and to serve and protect is the core purpose of every human being—past, present, and future. When we do what the Shakers called "worshipful work" for six days, we are to stop and rest, to be renewed, just as God was after six days of creating the world. The mention of the Creation story here in the Sabbath commandment is code for "Pssst...hey! This story is connected to that one! There is something about our origins here—something about our purpose." It's an expansion of our understanding of our job description. Yes, our core purpose as humans is to serve; but this God does not believe in slavery. In the world of this God, every person—man, woman, child, slave, foreigner; and even the cattle and working animals—all get a full day off. Like giving and receiving; work and rest are both necessary parts of a single act that fulfill our human calling.

And in case we still missed that this particular commandment is hugely important, it's singled out from the rest of the Ten in Exodus 31 as the sign of the covenant with Moses. We're tipped off in Exodus 31:17 as yet again the passage loops us back to God working for six days and resting on the seventh at Creation, inviting us to see the connections between the stories. The Sabbath commandment is the only one of the Ten that's not found in other ancient law codes. It is unique to Israel. I'm guessing that's because a God who shares power, who allows lesser beings to participate in the process of creation itself, and who exercises dominion through cycles of service and rest was also a unique idea among the nations of the time.

So, what has all that got to do with us? Well, we are made in the image of God for one thing. So, what is true of God should be reflected in the way we live our lives. We should also share power, and exercise dominion by tying the towel of service around our waists and serving others, while ensuring that we ourselves and all those who labor for us have a day of rest. To serve and protect the earth and everything in, on, and above it is our most fundamental human purpose, and our own unique calling as individuals will always be some particular version of that service that is connected to our own gifts and talents.

But there's more than that. These ancient stories also hold out hope when the world seems to teeter on the brink of the formless void of chaos and non-existence. In both stories God created a world that was capable of renewal and regeneration. In Genesis 1, it was the land and the waters that produced the abundant life that filled them. In Genesis 2 it was the red-earth human who made sure all the animals came into existence and who protected them ever-after. And they were all told to be fruitful and multiply, because creation and re-creation are God's built-in safety valve in case the whole project goes off the rails. During lockdown we saw it. The smog cleared, pandas in captivity mated for the first time in over a decade. And from my Facebook feed I'm guessing it wasn't just pandas. Just sayin'...

We have the Spirit of God, the *ruach*, blowing overhead; we breathe it into our lungs; and through the cycle of service and rest we are both created and re-created. It is not good for us to be alone and God has made sure that we aren't. We were co-creators with God at the beginning; and we can do it again if we are willing. And if we're too sick to do it, the ground that birthed us will do it, and if the ground can't do it, then the waters will do it—because there is no us and them; what is done for any of creation is done for all of creation.

We are the red earth; and we have a job to do—a cycle of work and rest that can renew the face of the ground. It's the purpose of the human race: Serve, protect, take a nap. Repeat weekly. Amen.