

I HEARD THE SOUND OF YOU IN THE GARDEN  
A Sermon Preached at Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields  
Philadelphia, PA

On the Third Sunday after Pentecost | June 9, 2024  
From Genesis 3:8-15 | Psalm 51:1-12 | Hebrews 5:5-10 | John 12:20-33  
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1.

- Not many people realize that there are two creation accounts in the book of Genesis in the Bible.
- It seems that these two stories were told side-by-side for centuries in ancient Israelite antiquity and eventually later Jewish scribes placed these accounts together in the composition that would become our Bible.
- The first account can be found in Genesis 1.
- It's the "God said, 'let there be light,' creation in seven days version that you probably know.
- The second account is in Genesis 2 and 3.
- This is the one about Adam and Eve, and the Garden, and the snake... I'm guessing you've heard this one too.
- We heard a portion of it read just a few minutes ago.
- When I teach my Old Testament classes at the seminary, I refer to these stories as the *neat* version of creation. That's Genesis 1
- And the *messy* version; that's Genesis 2 and 3.

2.

- So, where do these names come from?
- Well, let's just think about it.
- In the neat version, how does God create?
- Everything is placed perfectly in its right place over the course of six days.
- On the seventh day, God rests, because God has good self-care.
- At the end of each day of creation God assesses the work and sees that "it was good."

- Except on the last day when God saw that it was “*very good.*”
- In the neat version of creation, how does God start?
- God separates and God coordinates.
- Light over here, darkness over here, sky up there, earth down there.
- I don’t know what you would prioritize if you were creating the universe, but God makes a calendar.
- Sun, moon, stars all of them moving in perfect regularity so we know what time it is and when to schedule our festivals, etc.
- I think of it like this, in the neat version, God is that friend or family member you have who always wants to make a spreadsheet.
- It’s a little different in the messy version, Genesis 2 and 3.
- How does God create there? Well, God gets dirty.
- In the neat version, God is this disembodied voice shaping the cosmos.
- In the messy version, God is first a gardener and then a potter.
- In the messy version, we hear bits and pieces about God’s body.
- It talks about God’s nostrils, God’s hands.
- Our reading today says that God just liked to walk through the garden enjoying the evening breeze.

3.

- Now, readers of the Bible have recognized distinctives between these two stories for centuries.
- Ancient rabbis and Christian theologians have traditionally read these creation accounts in Genesis as complimentary, each revealing to us substantive truths about the nature of God and of God’s creation.
- It’s really only in the modern era that the various inconcinnities between these accounts have caused any serious concerns for interpreters.
- This is in large part a result, I think, of a misguided and ultimately reductive effort to make science fit into a mold of knowing that was set by scripture, or sometimes vice versa.

- Ancient readers of the Bible often had a more nuanced way of reading the text that many of us moderns simply lack when we seek empirical answers to abstract questions.
- The truth, I believe, is that God is *both* neat and messy, just like you and I are.
- In fact, the Bible says as much here in these two stories.
- In the neat version of creation, in Genesis 1:27, it says that you and I are created in the image of God.
- But in the messy version of creation, in Genesis 2:7, it says that we are created in the image of dirt.
- God literally takes dirt or perhaps clay out and shapes the first human being out of it, and then breathes into it the breath of life.
- I think it is important that we as the church adopt something like this more ancient, and more playful strategy for interpreting these creation accounts.
- Historically, these two stories have been used frequently to justify all kinds of harm, especially to women and to people who identify as LGBT or Q.

4.

- Let me give you two examples from our reading this morning.
- So, in this part of the story, the first human beings have already taken a bite from that forbidden fruit, and they confess to God what they've done.
- The man blames the woman but if you look back and too often we believe him.
- But when you read the story in Hebrew and not in English translation, you see that in the conversation between the woman and the snake, all of the verbs are in plural forms.
- Basically, the snake has a southern accent, he's saying, "y'all" in Hebrew, but our English translations always render it as "you," which usually sounds singular in our ears.
- This suggests that the man was actually a part of that conversation; maybe he was there and he just didn't say anything.
- These kinds of minute, close readings are consequential because for centuries the church blamed the first woman, and in fact, all women for the first sin, and all sin.

- This story was supposedly a justification for all kinds of unfair policies and theologies.
- It doesn't help that in the verses just after our reading from today, God goes on to describe the consequences of that first sin.
- One of those consequences is this:
- To the woman, God says, "your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."
- When I talk about this story in the classroom, I call it a "description versus prescription" problem.
- A description versus prescription problem.
- The challenge is this, sometimes we can read scripture as *prescribing* the way things ought to be, the way things God wants them to be.
- But at other times, we can read scripture as simply *describing* the way things are, perhaps even to God's disappointment.
- With that distinction in mind, I believe that these curses are not prescription, they are description.
- In other words, as a result of human sin, harmful patriarchal systems have been a norm in countless human societies from antiquity to today.
- But that doesn't mean it is *supposed* to be that way.
- You know what else God says in these curses.
- God says to the man that the ground is cursed because of sin, and that it will be hard work to grow any food from it.
- But that didn't stop anyone from inventing tractors or using fertilizer, right?
- God also says that the pain of childbirth is increased because of this sin.
- But no one is forbidden from using an epidural.
- If bad soil and birth pain are blights and barriers to human thriving that we can work to overcome, why shouldn't we work also to eliminate the cursed idea that a man should rule over a woman?

5.

- What about the idea that God created men first and women second, and that that order somehow implies a kind of hierarchy?

- Well, again, if we look to the Hebrew, we see that the first human being is not called “man” or “male” exactly, it’s called “mortal.”
- That’s what *adam* (or the name Adam) means in Hebrew.
- In fact, it’s kind of a pun.
- God makes the first *adam* (mortal) out of *adamah*, which is the Hebrew word for soil.
- At first, God only creates one earth creature.
- That creature’s job is to tend to the garden that God has planted.
- It’s only after a time that God eventually says, “it’s not good” for this creature to be alone.
- Isn’t that interesting?
- In the neat version of creation, at the end of every day, God sees that it was good. It was good. Over and over again. It was good.
- But here in the messy version, we have just the opposite. It’s *not* good.
- There’s a problem in paradise.
- So God looks for a partner for that first creature.
- That is where all the animals come from in the messy version.
- God is playing matchmaker.
- I imagine a parade of parrots and elephants and sloths and eels and geckos, and while they’re all magnificent, none are a good fit for the first *adam*.
- It all feels kind of haphazard, doesn’t it?
- The neat God of Genesis 1 would be horrified.
- But maybe the messy God of Genesis 2 and 3 is more of an improviser.
- Finally, God puts the *adam* into deep sleep.
- Clearly, making something new wont work, so God goes back to the earth creature and removes their “side” as it says in Hebrew.
- And it’s only at this point, after one becomes two, that we have the words for “man” and “woman” in this story. Before that, it’s just the *adam*, the mortal.
- Suddenly, the interpretation of the priority of man over woman doesn’t feel so firm.

6.

- You know, sometimes I wonder about that first creature, the first *adam*, who carried within themselves both male and female.
- God never saw anything wrong with this *queer* creature.
- In fact, for a time, it was just the two of them together, the *adam* and God, tending the garden together.
- Clearly the creature wasn't quite what we expect a man to be nor quite what we expect a woman to be.
- But that wasn't the problem.
- The problem was that this first creature was alone and that's what God set out to correct.

7.

- If creation was meant to be a type of end to isolation, how tragic is it that in our reading today, after they sin, the two first people hide from God?
- And when God asks, "Where are you?," the man replies, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid."
- That intimacy was lost.
- That's what that first sin did, that's what is being described in these curses, sin destroyed the intimacy that humans had with God, with God's creation, and with one another.
- It messed us up so bad, that so many of the different ways that humans can experience intimacy we called sin, and the various spectrums of humanity that God made and called very good, we mistook as a curse.

8.

- When I teach about these creation stories to my students, I often ask them which version of creation resonates more with them.
- Because of what I've said today, maybe many of you would choose the messy God but I promise there's much that is worthy of our affection and worship in the God of the neat version as well.
- I think the trick is not to pick one or the other, but to allow for both stories to speak to us.

- It's a discourse, it's multivalent.
- We can celebrate the spectrum of theologies and anthropologies in these texts.
- It's in that good tension, I pray, that we may find that intimacy of the garden that we all need...
- ...from one another, from creation, and from our creator.
- Amen.