

“Formed”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Genesis 2:4b-25

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It's rare that we get to read both creation stories from Genesis in worship in the same year, but back in July, during our three week “space” series, we read the account from Genesis 1. It's the story that starts “In the beginning...” and goes through five days of God commanding things into order and into existence and declaring it all to be good before creating humans on the sixth day and then resting.

We're going to notice some stark differences in chapter 2. The first story is concerned with chaos and an overabundance of water that needs to be separated out and contained by a dome. God speaks things into existence and everything is happening on a grand cosmological scale. But here, there hasn't been any rain yet. God is up to a different project. Notice what God is doing, and notice *how* God is creating. There are enough Baptist-turned-Presbyterians here that someone out there might follow along in their pew Bible, and if you are that person you'll notice some translation choices in the text I'm about to read that are different from the NRSV. Don't worry, we'll get to them.

Now, hear the Word of God from Genesis 2:

In the day that the LORD God [YHWH] 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 the *adam* from the dust of the ground, and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life; and the *adam* became a living being.

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east and put there the *adam* whom God had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The LORD God took the *adam* and put it in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

And the LORD God commanded the *adam*, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the *adam* should be alone; I will make for it a suitable helper.” So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the *adam* to see what he would call them; and whatever the *adam* called every living being, that was its name. The *adam* gave names to all

cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for *adam* there was not found a suitable helper.

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the *adam*, and it slept; then God took one of its ribs and closed up the flesh in its place. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man God made into a woman and brought her to the *adam*. Then the *adam* said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of man this one was taken.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the *adam* and his woman were both naked, and were not ashamed.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We could really just spend the rest of this worship service getting supremely nerdy about all the Hebrew words and wordplay in this story. But there are two more hymns to sing and the Lord’s Supper to celebrate and I get in big trouble if I skip the offering. So if I have to pick one piece of the Hebrew puzzle to share, it’s the verb *yatsar*, which is translated “to form” here:

“...the LORD God formed the *adam* from the dust of the ground...”

“... out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal...”

What I love about *yatsar* is that it’s the verb you’d use for a sculptor. The noun form of it is the word for “potter.” The author of the “In the beginning...” story wants us to know that God is the great architect of the universe who will contain chaos with a very impressive ordering of things. The author of Genesis 2 — almost certainly a different author whose creation story the ancients had no qualms about placing right next to a contrasting tale — wants us to know something else about God.

In this story God is wearing jeans with paint and mud stains and patches on the knees. God is a potter, a set designer, a sculptor, and a bit of a mad scientist. What God wants to do more than anything at the beginning is to make cool stuff and have it live. So God builds and plants and makes to grow. And God pulls together dirt from the ground — the *adamah* in Hebrew! — and makes the *adam* — a soil-being; an earth-person. Some have said that if we want to get the point across better in English, when *adam* becomes a proper name in the next chapter, we shouldn’t call him “Adam,” but “Dusty” or “Clay.”¹

And then God doesn’t wiggle a celestial nose to make greenery appear. No, God “planted a garden in Eden” — God is scattering seed and turning soil and getting grit under holy fingernails. I can’t help but think of the glory of Easter mornings when we read from the Gospel of John about Mary Magdalene weeping outside the empty tomb and explaining to the angels that someone has taken Jesus’s body. And then Jesus says to her “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

And then we chuckle when:

“Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’”

And the God of mulch and weeds and death-that-brings-life smiles with tears in her wrinkled eyes.

¹ I’m indebted to “NL:DR - The Narrative Lectionary Podcast for People on the Go” for this insight, and several others throughout this sermon.

God adds two lovely features in Eden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God will tell the *adam* not to eat from that second one. It brings the full range of earthly experience, including death. It brings comedy and tragedy. It brings judgment and black-and-white thinking. It brings freedom and the ability to be a jerk. And since God put it in the garden and then told a human not to touch it, we don't have to read chapter 3 to know how *that's* going to turn out.

I'm not sure if the garden is planted in order to keep ol' Dusty busy — to give the *adam* something to do — or if Dusty was only created because God needed the help. Perhaps both are somewhat true. What is clear is that God's intent is that the earth-person will be God's gardener, the keeper of what has been created, sustaining a living ecosystem and helping it to grow, co-creating more and more life.

God decides that one earth-being in a big garden is pretty lonely, and so God gets to making a helper. And here I want to make a big stinkin' deal about some Hebrew again. The word here is *ezer*, and when we get to the part where it turns out the woman is a good match to be the *ezer*, we might be tempted to see a subordinate role there — the woman as Robin to Dusty's Batman. We would, of course be mistaken. God is not looking for an Assistant to the Regional Manager of Eden here. *Ezer* appears through the Hebrew Scriptures, and most of the time — especially in the psalms — it's used to describe God!

So the next time some beloved child of God seeks to use this text to talk gibberish about a woman's role, you can remind them that God was looking for an earthly savior for the mud-dude who was clearly going to need someone with a clue.

Also, that after making all the other creatures, the *adam* and then all these potential partners — “How about this one, Dusty? No? Okay, he said ‘no’ to the armadillo. What say you to this...turkey!” — the ultimate creation (literally the last, the bookend to the earth and heavens) is the woman. And it is only when the *adam* sees “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” that we get a new word introduced for “man.”

The first creation story is focused on the grandeur of God's creation and how powerful God is and how good everything God made was, in the beginning.

This story shows us the intimate side of God, who breathes life into nostrils and does lots of patient sculpting and sowing. This story is so much more human-focused — less awe and more “aww!” — and this should be exciting and interesting to us. Why are we here, Genesis 2?

We are here to tend God's garden and to care for God's creation and to be in relationship with all those animals of the field and birds of the air and with each other!

So, how's all that going?

The rest of the Bible, literally starting in the next chapter, tells a story of humanity struggling to stay in relationship with God and, perhaps even more, to relate to one another. We have made some great strides in how we treat each other over the centuries, though the reality of broken relationship within humanity persists in ugly ways every day. As people seeking to follow God, we are called to tend to those relationships in our own lives and on the grander scale of all the children of God's garden, seeing our own bones and sinew in one another. As Sam Patton heads about as far away from us as he possibly could go to teach English for the Peace Corps, he will be one of our reminders of this call.

As for the garden itself and the creatures who are not our *ezers* — well, that situation has only gotten worse, and dramatically so in the past century and a half. Self-interest and greed are manifest in humanity's belief that what matters is our stuff, the stuff that we create, the idols to which we give value. We are burning down the garden and filling its waters with trash and I, for one, will have the gall to then be upset with God when I read the next chapter and God gets angry.

Our Creator is seen in stars and winds and vast, empty space
and magnificent beauty and weird little bugs.

Our Creator is seen in the simple purpose of thriving when given everything we could possibly need
for a life of meaning and abundance.

Our Creator is seen in the eyes of friends and partners and beloved animals.

Our Creator is seen in dirt and breath and gardeners and decay and a tiny green shoot emerging.

Our Creator is seen in the breaking of bread and the sharing of cups and standing in the garden and
asking why things have gone awry and not backing down when the powerful try to tell a different story
of how this all ought to work.

Our Creator is seen in life and death and life.

Our Creator is the one who continues to seek us after we break just about everything.

May we be formed and reformed to tend and to name and to till and to recognize humanity wherever
we tread with our dusty souls.

Amen.