

“In the Beginning”
Genesis 2:4B-9, 15-25
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By now you may be wondering: what on earth are we thinking with this series, “Our Bible, Ourselves”? 40 weeks, really? What if it bombs? Yeah, well, that’s crossed my mind too! But most of all, I’m excited about it – because I love God’s Word, and I’ve experienced the Bible’s power to touch my heart and change my life.

Let me also assure you about what this series *isn’t* – it’s not to prep us for a trivia contest about how much we know, like old-fashioned Bible quizzes in Sunday school – though if there *were* a TV trivia show, that could be very cool. Nor is this series designed to shame us into knowing Scripture, because we “should” know the Bible, as if God’s love depends on our piety.

No, we’re launching into this series because hundreds of you answered a survey last year confessing your deep desire to know the Bible better, to come close to God’s “living Word,” to be nurtured by Scripture. To discover the Bible’s answers to the most intimate questions of our lives: questions like, who am I, really? What’s the purpose of my life? What does joy look like, and courage, and hope? What matters, and what doesn’t? What am I to do with this “one wild and precious life,” in poet Mary Oliver’s words?

So we start at the beginning: today we focus on creation, and the core question of life: Who am I?

A quick review: Last week, as Amy walked us through Genesis 1, we learned that chaos isn't God's intention for our world. In fact, from the start, God has been creating order out of chaos. On the first day: God separated light and darkness, and it was good; on the second day, God fashioned sky above and earth below, and it was good; on the third day, God shaped seas and land, and it was good; for six days until God finished putting the world in order. God speaks, and it is good.

And what did we learn about ourselves in Genesis 1? That we humans are the apple of God's eye, the height of creation, and more than "good": we are "very good." Male and female, we are made in God's own image and likeness. And with that gift comes responsibility: to those who are given much, much is expected in return. We are given, in fact, the whole earth to tend, God's beloved creation to nurture and care for, entrusted into our hands. Then and only then does God rest, on the 7th day, the Sabbath.

But now, *immediately*, here's this second story of creation, with a completely different tone, a different order in which things are made, a different means by which God fashions us into being. It is not that one is true and the other isn't – it's a bringing together of two equal truths. In the first

Creation story in Genesis 1, the transcendent and glorious God of the universe speaks from afar, and the world comes to life. Now, in Genesis 2, an equal truth is told: that our loving God comes humbly among us, walking in the garden, stooping down and scooping up the dirt, fashioning us like a sculptor, till the art is just right, taking raw earth –in Hebrew, *ha-adamah* – and shaping it into a human being - *ha adam* – human out of humus.ⁱ Then God goes further still, blowing God’s own breath – literally, God’s own Spirit – into us, to bring us to life. We, all of us, are filled with God’s holy breath, God’s holy spirit. What a comfort to know that, with every single breath, God’s spirit is this close to us, inside of us, all along, even when we do not recognize it. Let’s pause for a moment to honor that: to close our eyes and breathe, and ponder what it means that every breath is God’s own spirit in us.

What else does this story tell us about ourselves? There’s a curious twist in this story: rightvafter the litany of Genesis 1, “God made ... and it was good,” over and over again, for the first time, we hear that something is “not good.” “The Lord God said, ‘It is *not good* that the human should be alone.’” It is *not good* that the human is alone. From the beginning, God noticed our loneliness. God noticed what it’s like for us to be without a friend in the world: how sad, how alone, how *unknown*. And we know how that feels, don’t we? Not the temporary – and sometimes welcome – feeling of quiet, but the heart-wrenching struggle of trying to get through life with no other living creature who knows or cares that you’re alive. My heart aches for the recently

widowed man who is lost without his wife ... for the heartbroken parent who has lost her child ... for the recent college graduate who feels thrust into the world without a clue where she is headed ... for the CEO who feels the weight of the world on his shoulders, and not a soul with whom he can share his burden. “It is *not good* for any human being to be alone,” God said, almost as soon as we had breath in our lungs. So God willed that we should not be stuck in solitary confinement, but should have company for the journey of life.

So notice what happens next in our life-story: God gives us company to quench our loneliness. Out of the same ground from which we are made, God scoops up more dirt and shapes *more life* into being: every animal of the field and bird of the air, brothers and sisters for us, sacred company. Then one by one, God leads each one of them, every living walking, flying creature to us, to introduce us, and place it in our hands to nurture. We are privileged to tend and care for, and even – with Godly responsibility – to name them, as if they are our own children, from aardvark to zebra, from acorn woodpecker to zone-tailed hawk. From the start, our tending of the earth and all its creatures: it is not just a “job” to do, or a commodity to “own”; it is God’s tender entrustment of everything into our hands, God’s desire to give us sacred company. This is essential to who we are – and the question between the lines, of course, is this: have we been faithful to it? I could not help but wonder last month as we traveled in Oregon: the coast was beautiful, the crashing waves majestic in their thunder. But then, as we drove east over the coastal range toward

Portland, the sky descended in swirling gray: the smoke from forest fires blanketing the region, its soot and ash a warning sign of more changes to come. As we look to the rising sea and melting ice and changing winds, do we see our calling in their tending? Do we look at the earth as holy ground on which we walk ... holy ground that yields life, for us and, according to God's sacred plan, for generations still to come? It is a piece, I think, of who we are, the Scripture tells us.

Yet the gift of animals and birds, and our calling to tend them, even this isn't the end of the story, is it? For once again, God saves the best for last. For in all creation, there still isn't a helper, a partner, a companion fit for that first lonely human. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the human, and God took one of the ribs and closed up a place with its flesh, and made from the rib another human being. Just as *ha-adamah*, the dirt, is shaped into *adam*, human out of humus, now the human one is reshaped again into what the Hebrew calls *ish* and *ishah*: male and female. And finally, there is a partner, a companion, a helper. Someone who knows our loneliness. Someone who knows who we are. Someone to call us by name.

And perhaps you know this blessing too. For me, it is, of course, about the gift of my wonderful marriage - and yet this deep feeling of knowing, and being known - it is also more than my marriage. I am, as many of you know, an identical twin, and it is literally true that my being was divided in two

before birth, and there is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh alive in my dear sister Karen. It is remarkable to feel so “not alone,” so fully known, and loved anyway. 30 years later, I came to know that love as well in my wonderful husband John, my companion and helper, who is my rock to lean on, my shoulder to lean on, and hilarious partner to laugh with. And I have come to know that love as well in my adorable daughter, who has seen me at my best and worst and whom I hope will model herself on the former. I see bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh – and of my husband’s DNA as well, of course – in her, and I am blessed by this inexpressible depth of love. And less literally, but equally true, I am blessed by close friends and our church family who know me and love me anyway; and I pray that I can be even half as much a blessing to them.

This is the crux of it: we are made not to be alone. We are made to be with others who know us through and through, and love us anyway. We are meant to be with those who see us as we really are – “naked,” literally or figuratively – unretouched, no make-up, no fabricated stories, no editing, no “everything is fine, fine, fine.” We are meant to be with those who see us as we really are and still not be ashamed. And in all of the unvarnished truth about ourselves – bitter and sweet, angry and tender, weak and strong, fearful and courageous – in all of the naked truth of ourselves, when we find ourselves with someone who is, at last, “bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh,” then we know what it means to be naked, and *not ashamed*.

Who am I, we ask, who am I really? And this is what the Bible answers: You are created in God's own image, male or female. You are filled with God's own breath and spirit. You are given the earth and all of its creatures to tend and care for – they're in your hands now. And above all, you are not meant to be alone. You are meant to be fully known. You are meant to be who you really are, and God's dearest hope is that you never, ever have to feel ashamed. For you are, and always will be, God's own beloved child. Amen.

ⁱ Thanks to my friend Rick Spalding for this verbal parallel. See <http://covnetpres.org/2004/11/speaking-the-name/>