

Pictures on the Wall

We find ourselves back at the beginning, sort of. As you have probably noticed, this creation story is actually the second one, and in many people's eyes it runs a distant second to the first. The first creation narrative is the grand one, the beautiful one with seven orderly days when God brings forth life on a cosmic scale. It reads almost like a scene from *Fantasia* where with outstretched arms God ushers in sea and sky, mountains and valleys, wind and stars and swimming things and humanity in one fell swoop. And, the writers tell us, "It was good."

This morning's account sounds dramatically—and maybe disappointingly—much more modest. It begins with a lengthy description of a rather humble beginning. It sounds almost like a story told by a beloved but longwinded aunt who keeps adding by-the-way details while she meanders her way to the point. She starts with an extended wind-up:

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation 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...¹

Then she gets to the main point it seems:

... then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.²

It can be a bit exasperating, right? Why didn't the writers just say that in the first place?

¹ Genesis 2:4b-6, NRSV, updated edition

² Genesis 2:7, NRSVue

It may seem odd for me to keep referring to multiple writers, but that seems to be the case in Genesis, and throughout the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures. As you may know, these creation narratives are not eyewitness accounts. No court reporter was present at creation taking down every detail, no one with an iPhone at the ready to document just how things happened. Instead after generations of sharing stories around campfires and at family suppers, someone or someones was inspired to write things down. These writings are gifts from our ancestors in the faith, the ones who recorded how they understood their and our relationship with the God of the universe. The first account—the grand and orderly one—is believed to have been written down by the Priestly writers, which explains why it reads almost like liturgy, like words for worship. This morning’s account is thought to have been written by another tradition. The parts of the Old Testament attributed to these writers tend to be earthier, and God tends to be “more intimate and hands on.”³ It is not necessarily an image that competes with the grand and cosmic one; it is simply a different take. This understanding of God is more down to earth, and that’s the God we meet here.

And this God begins creation from a dusty patch of ground. Nothing has been planted because there is no water and there is no one to take care of the growing things, we are told. A few years ago, I flew out to Texas for a family funeral. I have dear friends from Texas who bemoan all the trees on our side of the world because they get in the way of the horizon. But when I landed in Dallas I had a hard time not being overwhelmed by the flat landscape and the vast stretches of dry and dusty land. To me it feels foreign, but to my Texas friends, especially

³Gail O’Day and David Peterson, eds., “Two Different Creation Stories,” *The Access Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1999) 3.

those from west Texas, it feels like home. The same could be said of the community who first shared this story of creation. They lived on the edge of the desert, so for them there is great good news in a God who begins creating in their backyard and makes something glorious and rich and fertile from it. God names the place Eden, which according to some scholars means “delight.”⁴ So according to this account, God’s relationship with humanity and with all of creation begins in delight.

We think of Eden as paradise, but it is not perfect at the beginning. God quickly grows concerned that the man, Adam—as we come to know him—is alone. And this is not good. Adam needs a helper, a partner, a companion, so God creates every creature imaginable to see what will work, to see what will be fit to work and serve alongside him. Not one of these creatures is quite right for that purpose. Creation needs some tweaking it seems, and so God the crafter and creator refashions the first creation and makes a helper, a partner fit to stand and work alongside him. That’s not how it has always been interpreted, of course. This narrative is some people’s second choice because it has been used—or misused—to say that women are second best, also-rans, or afterthoughts. And while Adam will soon point a finger at Eve as the reason he takes that fateful nibble of the forbidden fruit, I don’t believe Eve’s being created second makes her any less precious in God’s eyes. We tend to forget that Adam is changed—recreated even—when Eve is created. He is unfinished before the woman is created, because creation is incomplete without human community. Eden, the garden of delight is not fully delightful without a community dwelling within it. And when Adam sees this partner, he, too, is delighted, because he does not have to brave this new adventure alone.

⁴ O’Day and Peterson, 5.

This not-being-alone piece still rings true. I do not think this story is all about matchmaking or insisting that everyone needs another half. Each and every one of us is a whole, complete, and beloved creation whether we are paired off or not. I *do* believe that we are built and fashioned for community. This narrative and all of scripture tells us that we are formed from the beginning for relationship with God and one another. To be alone, left on our own is not what God intends. I don't mean that being alone on occasion isn't a good and healthy thing. Each member of my family relishes those occasional moments when we get the house to ourselves. Solitary moments are not the issue. It is when we begin to think we are built to always and only go it alone that we tend to lose our way. It is when we seek to exclude or isolate others that we leave the garden of delight in the dust.

We talked some this past summer about how rampant loneliness has become, especially among young adults. According to one poll, 30 percent of millennials feel lonely:

Furthermore, 22 percent of millennials in [one] poll said they had zero friends. Twenty-seven percent said they had 'no close friends,' 30 percent said they have 'no best friends.'⁵

It is not good that the human is alone.

Having moved to North Carolina, I now live within two hours of several of my closest friends. These are the ones who will hug me before I have even set foot in the door, the ones with whom I can laugh and cry and scream and sit silently beside. With them I can fall down, mess up, and confess the many ways I have fallen short and let myself and others down. In their eyes I see that glimmer of recognition, that intimate connection that sees me as bone of their

⁵ <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/8/1/20750047/millennials-poll-loneliness>

bones, that relationship that knows we are made of the same stuff and built to survive all the other stuff together. With them I am in the garden; with them I find community. And by the grace of God, I find it here, too, as do many of you I believe. And that *is* good, and holy, and delightful.

The Highwomen are talented artists with successful solo careers, but in a collaboration from a few years ago, they found something rich and deep that they did not find as solo acts. I have often listened to the entirety of their album over and over again, but one song in particular has stuck with me from the first moment I heard it. It's called "Crowded Table":

*I want a house with a crowded table
And a place by the fire for everyone
Let us take on the world while we're young and able
And bring us back together when the day is done.
The door is always open
Your picture's on my wall
Everyone's a little broken
But everyone belongs
Yeah everyone belongs⁶*

That longwinded aunt I mentioned earlier might have trouble telling a succinct story, but chances are, she delights in you and has your picture on her wall. Mine, too. I think that's at least one takeaway from this earthy, messy story of delight that begins in the dust and the dirt. Yes, we worship the God who whirls the planets and brings entire galaxies into existence, and we also worship a God who can bring beauty and delight out of a barren patch of ground in our own backyard, a God who is concerned not to leave humanity to fend for itself. When storms

⁶ Highwomen, "Crowded Table" Lyrics found here: <https://tasteofcountry.com/highwomen-crowded-table/>

rage and fires burn, when death comes and the mental illness diagnosis is confirmed, when words grow hot and relationships are broken, we need a God who knows how to recreate us, to shape us into a community where we see and know each other, a community where we are known and are seen, a community where even the loneliest stranger can be known and seen, too. We are built to be a place and a people where we see ourselves in others and others see themselves in us; we are shaped to be a place and a people who remind one another over and over and over again that our story begins with God's delighting in us and breathing life into us, a place where we and others can find our pictures lovingly hung on the wall, trusting that God has our pictures on his wall, too.

It is not good for the human to be alone. And we are not.

Thanks be to God. Amen.