

“Our Common Work”
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There are certain rites of passage one goes through when they answer the call from God to pursue a vocation in ministry and enter the required educational program that is a seminary education. One of those rites of passage are the introductory courses of study undertaken in the first year of seminar, such as Introduction to the Old Testament, Introduction to the New Testament, Introduction to Theology, etc. Sometimes the learning that happens in those courses is unexpected by students who may have only a Sunday-school level of biblical knowledge before master’s level seminary coursework. And so for instance, at Princeton Theological Seminary, there have been many a seminary student, throughout the years, who have been known to say to their lunchmates in the dining hall of the seminary, after a morning of lectures on the Old Testament, that they are shocked to discover Moses is not actual author of the first books of the Old Testament, and how could there really be two creation stories in Genesis—Sunday School flannel boards had never indicated anything of the sort.

But in the reading of today’s scripture, you may have heard a very different account of creation than the one more familiar to us from creation readings in worship. Genesis 1:1-2:4a is an account of creation that is attributed to a so-called Priestly writer, while Genesis 2:4b-25 is attributed to a so-called Yahwist writer. Both accounts have different origins and both have very different points of view and things that they emphasize in telling the story of creation. The two accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 are not unlike the various accounts of the birth, life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus in the four gospels.

In the 2nd creation account—the one Charlotte read for us today, the focus shifts from the creation of heaven and earth to the creation of earth and heaven. This signals that the second creation account is intently focused on the earthly context and the human characters. In the second account of creation, *both* God and creatures have an important role in the creative enterprise and their spheres of activity are interrelated. God is not presented as powerful and the creatures powerless. In spite of the risks involved, God chooses the way of less than absolute control, for the sake of a relationship of integrity in which power is shared with that which is other than God.

In this 2nd creation account, we encounter a picture of Creator God as a potter and a farmer. The image of Yahweh God with hands in the dirt is remarkable. Here is a profound statement about the depths to which God has entered the life of creation. God’s very life is then breathed into the human creature. This reflects for us what is true of all of us—that we all of something of God’s own self in us—something of God is in each one of us and this is an integral part of our human identity—it enables life to move from God out into the larger world all around us.

God makes us like God and somehow our bodies are important in this likeness. God creates us to share something with us, and to receive this life and love, we share a likeness with God. But one of the most profound lies about the creation of humanity is the idea that what makes us like God is a kind of sovereignty, a freedom from contingency and connection. When men justified the exclusion of women from education or certain occupations, they used language of dependency—that women were subject to their own bodies, subject to emotions, physically weaker. Somehow men were seen as being more “like” God because of a perceived independence, an ability to emotionally discount. They did not bear children and were not obviously limited by childbearing or nursing. When European explorers and colonizers first encountered indigenous peoples they commented on how the indigenous people seemed to be subject to nature, primitive, like animals. To be like God was to control and subdue the land. In this story of creation freedom meant sovereignty, independence—that certain differences were signs of who should and should not be able to determine their own life.

But what we actually encounter in the 2nd creation story tells us a very different story from the lies that have all too often circulated about God and humanity in creation. Genesis 2 tells us that in the beginning, God planted a garden. Garden imagery throughout the Old Testament is associated with both love and worship. In the context of an existence but unfinished world, God molds the first human creature out of dirt like a potter shaping clay and then breathes life into the inert earthen model. Again, we are given a surprising image of God bending down, getting hands dirty, and giving mouth-to-mouth for the express purpose of having a partner gardener and caretaker. The purpose is not about sovereignty or mastery. It is about nurture. The garden is for the human creature and the creature is for the garden. If it were not for the creature, the garden could not exist, for it is the purposeful task of the human creature to serve and look after the garden. Fruit trees, after all, need looking after. Fruit trees need someone to eat their fruit. But, in a similar way, without the garden, the human creature could not continue to exist, for it would have no source of food.

We in the church are often quite familiar with the order and symmetry of the account of creation in Genesis. Phrases like, “and there was evening and there was morning, on the first day” or “and God saw what God had made and it was good” or “and God said, let there be light and there was light.” These are comforting and awe-inspiring phrases. But what about Genesis 2 and all those rivers which are sourced from a river that miraculously emerges from the ground? What are we to make of this? What does this tell us? Biblical scholars have suggested that perhaps the names indicates that the river in Eden is the source of water to the north and south and to Jerusalem itself. Whatever the case may be, this is imaginary geography that is given here. Imaginary geography in service of a realistic point, which is this: God’s creation is the source of life for the entire world. God shaped each of us and set us about our work. These events are so real they can in principle be located on the map. When we, as Christian, get courageous and curious to ask the question: where are you from? We want to create intentional space for a variety of diverse, ambiguous and complex responses to be given by each person. But we also, from our 2nd creation account, can affirm whole heartedly that we believe that everyone is beloved, shaped from the dust of the earth and the breath of God. And that means everyone has a

brutiful (brutal and beautiful) story to tell. Our stories are messy and beautiful, painful and hopeful—being written and rewritten over time.

In this first week for our fall series, we hope to affirm the particularity of each person's identities while also acknowledging our common ground. Formed from the dust and God's very breath in the garden of Eden, we have a common home, a shared birthplace, and a collective calling: to sustain and care for all of creation.

One of the creators of this worship series, the Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity shares this story: "In the middle of the November 2020 US election season, my next-door neighbor walked out to his front yard one day while I was planting shrubs in mine. Political signs for different candidates loomed like silent silhouettes behind us. Though we've shared lots of small talk over the years, on this day, my neighbor leaned on the fence that divides us and, after complimenting my rhododendrons, asked, 'So, do you have family in the area?' I talked about my cousins who live nearby, about my parents who quit their jobs to move to the mountains as newlyweds, about the many generations before me who had spent summers here, making it a temporary and permanent home. And he told me about his large family, the many cousins and siblings who have called these same mountains home. After a while, he went back into his house and I returned to my shrubs. Our conversation did not unite us or reconcile our differing worldviews. But he essentially said to me, 'I've been meaning to ask. . . where are you from?' And through curiosity and listening, we remembered that we are born of the same dust to which we will one day return."

Friends—congregants, members, and friends of Westminster—on this, my last Sunday as your designated pastor, as we all are feeling a whole host of different emotions, let us remember that you and I both have God's breath coursing through us, giving us life and bringing us into relationships of mutuality and care with God and all of creation. You and I both have been created for the express purpose of being partners with God in God's work of tending, nurturing, and sustaining all of creation. While our differences from one another are now leading us on separate paths, at our core, we still have vital common ground between us. We all are God's beloveds. We all have work from God to do. We have spent a year listening and being curious about one another together and that has changed us both, I'd like to think, for the better. May God forgive and heal us both for the ways that we have hurt and wounded each other in our listening and in our mishearing. And may we never stop seeking to be faithful to God's call on both of our lives as we now go our separate ways. Amen.