

6 July 2014

Foundations: Creation and Recreation Genesis 1-10

In today's Church, the Bible has a peculiar position. On the one hand, we pretty much all agree that it's important as a basis for our faith. On the other hand, we don't know it very well. This actually makes the Bible dangerous. You see, people who are willing to go to the trouble to sift through the Bible's vast array of writings can cull out selected verses to argue pretty much anything they want. And those of us who don't know the Bible may have a feeling that what they're saying isn't right, but can't show why. Here's what I believe: I believe that when we know the Bible *as a whole* – not just as a source of ammunition quotes – only then can we understand the richly varied nature of God. With that in mind, I usually spend summer sermon series painting Bible stories with a broad brush. This is a little more relaxed than the usual sermon, which fits the summer feeling, but make no mistake: it's very important. And today I start one of the most important parts of scripture for us to know: I start at the beginning.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formlessness and emptiness, and darkness was over the deep, but the Spirit of God, like a mother hen, brooded over the waters of chaos. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And it was good. And God separated the light from the darkness and called the light day and the darkness night. One day.

Then God said, "Let there be a space in the waters," and God pushed chaos off to the side, above and below, and called the boundary of chaos "the sky," and that was good, too, for a second day. Then God said, "Let's divide the waters again," and God did, and there arose *dry land* from the waters, which God called "earth," and then God made plants sprang from the earth – fruit trees and grasses, all bearing within them seeds for creating other plants like themselves – and it was an earth bursting with life, and it was a good third day. On the fourth day, God spoke to the sky at the edge of space and said, "Let there be lights, bright and glowing and reflecting and twinkling, to mark the days and years and seasons, and the lights shone from the edge of chaos," and there were, and it was good. Then God said, "More life! Let there flying things and swimming things, and let them fill the air and the seas, and let them be fruitful and multiply," and it was so, and then on the sixth day, "Still more life! Let there be be swarming things and beasts on the earth, cattle and wild things, and let them all be fruitful and multiply," and it was so, and it was so good.

And then God said, "Let us make one creature different – in our image and likeness – with a breath of our own life within, and let them rule over and care for the rest of the life on earth." And God made the one creature – both male and female – and called them *Adham*, humanity, and told them to be fruitful and multiply as well. And God looked at all life and all creation and smiled, "It is *very good*." And for all of one last day, a seventh day, God smiled.

Now, the most promising creation of all was *Adham*. Here's another way to tell that story. On the day when God made humanity, God decided to make one who could love freely, as God loves freely, so God knelt in the dirt and shaped mud into the form of a creature, then breathed God's own breath, God's own fertile brooding spirit, into the creature, and it was a man. And because God made the man to love, God then set about finding creatures for the man to love. God called all the animals to the man, who gave them names and liked them, but they fell short. They were not quite enough for the man to love freely and deeply and mutually. Dogs were close. Dogs were *almost* enough, except for some of the little yappy ones, but not quite. So God put the man to sleep, and in his sleep, drew out one rib and built from it a woman. When the man awoke, at first he only stared. Then he said, "That's it." And they loved. And when they loved, the image of God came to life. And God put them together in a garden filled with all sorts of delicious fruit, and told them to enjoy the garden, but gave them them one restriction. In the midst of the garden was the tree of knowledge, both good and evil, and God said: "Do not eat from that tree, lest you die."

Now of all the creatures God made, none was more cunning than the serpent, and one day the serpent said to the woman, “Is it true that God forbids you to eat from all these delicious trees?” And the woman said, “No! We can eat from all the trees of the garden. Well, except for that one, which we aren’t supposed to even touch, or else we’ll die.” And the serpent said, “Die? You won’t die. That’s the tree of knowledge, and when you have knowledge, you become like God, knowing good and evil. God’s holding you back, that’s what God’s doing.” And the woman looked at the tree of knowledge, and the one thing she was not permitted became the one thing she wanted most, and she ate from the tree and gave some to the man, and he ate as well.

That evening, God came to stroll through the garden with the man and woman he loved, but they hid themselves. God called out, “Man? Woman? Where are you?”

And the man looked guiltily out from behind a bush and said, “We heard you walking in the garden and we were ashamed and hid, because we were naked.”

And God said, “Naked. What is this new word you’ve invented?”

The man said, “It means that we realized we don’t want to show all of ourselves to you. So . . . so we stuck together these fig leaves to hide ourselves.”

“Who told you that you were – what was your word? – naked? Have you eaten from the tree I told you not to eat?”

The man said that it wasn’t his fault but the woman’s, and the woman said that it wasn’t her fault but the snake’s, and God sighed. This *naked* – this hiding things out of shame– was going to be a problem. And God said, “You cannot stay here now, in this paradise where all is given to you. You have chosen knowledge, and with knowledge comes great possibility, for both good and evil. You can do too much harm now. You must leave this place for a harsher world, where you will still be fruitful, but only with hard labor.” And the man and woman turned to leave, but God called them back, “Wait. Those fig leaves. They won’t be enough where you’re going.” So before sending them out to a harsher world, God made them clothes of animal skins to protect them, because whatever they had done, God never stopped loving them.

The man and the woman left the garden and began their labors. The woman’s labors soon produced a son, whom she called Cain, and then another son, whom she called Abel. And the brothers grew up and God loved them, too. Cain worked the earth, growing crops, and Abel worked the pasture, keeping sheep, and both brought from their labor to give some to God. But Cain grew jealous of Abel. It seemed to him that Abel’s gifts to God were better and that God loved Abel more, so one day Cain took his brother out into the fields, where he struck him down and killed him. And God came to Cain. “Cain, where is your brother Abel?”

Cain looked at the ground and shrugged. “How should I know? Don’t I have enough to keep track of without riding herd on your darling boy? Am I my brother’s keeper?”

And God sighed. “Cain, do you think I don’t know what happened? I made the ground you stand on, the ground you labor over, and the ground that soaked up your brother’s blood. I have heard the earth crying out your crime. I created life; how did you dare make yourself like me in choosing life or death for another? You may stay here no longer. You have rejected your brother, and now you will have no one at all. From this day you are a wanderer, a vagabond, without family, alone.”

And as Cain turned to walk away, he cried out, “God, it is too much! You condemn me to death, because alone I am defenseless.”

And God said, “Wait. You are right.” So God set a seal of protection on Cain, a mark to show that regardless of what he had done, God stood by him, for God never stopped loving Cain.

The first man and woman had another son, and somehow there seem to have been other men and women on earth, too – the Bible is vague about where they came from – but both Seth and Cain found wives and had children, who also found mates and produced children, and so on. Some, like Enoch, a great great great grandson of Seth, walked with God. Most, however, were like Lamech, great great great grandson of Cain, who boasted of the murders he committed. Indeed, crime and arrogance and shamefulness spread throughout the earth, so that God wept over what had become of the image of God. For among human beings, as it says, “every device of the thoughts of their hearts were only evil always.” Evil, not life and love, was what was fruitful and multiplying, so God said, “I will wipe the slate clean. I will flood the earth with the waters of chaos again and what I have created I will uncreate.”

But then God said, “Wait. I remember how good it all was at first. I will start again.” And God chose one man, named Noah, and his family to be that new start. And God spoke to Noah and told him to build an ark – a huge, floating sanctuary of grace in the midst of the waters. And Noah did what the Lord commanded. He built the ark and he gathered males and females of all creatures into the ark, just as God had said, and when he was done, God opened the sky and let the waters in. The boundary collapsed, and chaos flooded the earth again. But Noah and his family floated safely on the waves, and the Spirit of God brooded again over the waters and, like a dove, brought hope to Noah that the earth would be renewed, and that the waters of chaos would recede.

And when the ark rested on dry land again, and the plants began springing again from the earth, and the doors of the ark burst open to release the creeping things and the cattle and the birds and the wild beasts, then God smiled again, and God’s smile was like the sun on the far side of the storm and was brilliant with color. Red and green and blue and indigo and violet. And Noah bowed his face to the ground before God and built an altar of thanksgiving to the Lord, and God said to him, “Do you see those colors through the mist? That is my smile, and that is my promise. I will never destroy the earth utterly. I made it. It is very good. And I will never stop loving you. Never.”

Creation and Evolution, Original Sin, where did Cain’s wife come from, what’s this with a talking snake, dinosaurs and the flood. I suspect there has been more theological ink (and blood) spilt over the stories you’ve heard this morning than over any other part of the Bible. But today, don’t pay attention to all that. Just hear the story. Behind the arguments are only more arguments. Behind the story is God.