

Grounded in Connection
(Summer Series)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-20

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day the LORD God made earth and heavens—when no shrub of the field was yet on the earth, no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not made it rain upon the earth, and there was no human to till the ground; but water would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed *ha'adam*, dust from the *adamah*, and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being.

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there placed the human whom they had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree pleasant to see and good for food, the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The LORD God took the human and settled them in the garden of Eden, to till it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the human, "From every tree of the garden you may freely eat. But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat from it, you will surely die."

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the human to be alone. I will make them a helper, a counterpart." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the human, to see what they would call them. Whatever the human called each living creature, that became its name. The human gave names to all livestock, to the birds of the sky, and to every animal of the field—but for the human, no helper, no counterpart, was found.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Grounded in Connection

Do you ever wonder why the Bible has two creation stories? No? Just me? Maybe it's a Bible nerd thing, but ask yourself, why would someone feel the need to write a second creation story, especially considering how good the first one is? I'm not usually one for the King James translation, but it's hard to beat its opening lines: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light."

Full of poetry and liturgy, drama and grandeur, the first story of creation starts big with an empty void and moves, step by step, down to the creation of the birds of the air, fish of the sea, and animals of the land, all culminating in the creation of humanity. It is good, good, and then, it is very good. And maybe best of all, it ends with permission to take a nap as even God takes a day to rest.

As far as origin stories go, it's a good one. It lays out the order of things, covers the details, imbues humanity with a vocation, and ends with a nap. A full story. And yet ... in the very next chapter, the story of creation begins again.

Origin stories are a dime a dozen. Every culture and institution has them. They're the stories that tell us where we came from, what we value, and how we came to be who we are. They're the stories we tell on college application essays and in eulogies—stories that convey values and character, that explain the shape of a life or a community.

They're the stories we tell on holiday weekends like this one: stories about declarations written and ideals defined, stories about courage and sacrifice, freedom and a land of the brave. They're stories not just about the past, but about who we are, what we believe, and who we want to become.

Which brings me back to the question of why our faith decided to place two origin stories back to back at the beginning of scripture. Like the four gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, these two stories are often get conflated or confused, but scholars are clear that they are two distinct narrative. So what was it that was missing from the first story that was so important it required not just an amendment or post script, but an entire second story?

Both stories have similar beginnings, both in their poetry and scope: “these are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day the Lord God made earth and heavens—when no shrub of the field was yet in the earth” The echoes of Genesis 1 are unmistakable—there is emptiness and void, a God who creates everything from scratch. But where the first story of creation spends verse after verse on the creation of order, on establishing the world in which humanity will reside, the second story jumps right to the creation of a human: “In the day the Lord God made earth and heavens ... when there was nothing ... God formed *ha’adam*, dust from the *adamah*.”

Ha’adam, where we get the name ‘Adam’ from, and often translated as man. But the Hebrew is far more playful, and far less specific. The ground in Hebrew is *adamah*, so *ha’adam* is a ground creature, an earthling. No gender or sex is assigned to this mud person into whom God breathes the breath of life, animating them into a living being.

If the first creation story tells us how the world is ordered, about the work that went into distinguishing night from day, light from dark, the sea from the land, the second story is far more concerned about the creation of humanity, about making sure we know that we come from the earth, that nothing could grow because God had not yet created an earth creature to till the ground. If the first creation story wants to make sure we know our place in the grand order of things, the second story of creation seems far more concerned that we know our limits—we are created beings, we are dust, we were created to make the earth productive, and while there is much in this creation for us to enjoy, there are limits: “Out of the ground the Lord God made grow every tree pleasant to see and good for food ... The Lord God took the human and settled them in the garden of Eden, to till it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the human, “From every tree of the garden you may freely eat. But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” In the first creation story, humanity is instructed to “be fruitful and multiply.” In the second story, there is invitation (you may eat), but the first instruction is one of limitation: do not eat from this tree; it is not all for you.

Indeed, after the first few verses, the second creation story noticeably deviates from the first. Chapter one of Genesis is a litany of “it is good, it is good, it is very good.” In chapter two, not only is there no liturgical crescendo of benediction, there is the opposite: “It is not good,” God says in Genesis 2. “It is not good for the human to be alone.” In the first story of creation, after God has created all the fish of the sea and birds of the air, and creatures of the land, God creates male and female in God’s image. There are two from the beginning. But in the second story, the order of creation is reversed: God shapes a human out of the dust of the earth, and then goes on to form every animal of the field and every bird of the sky, bringing each to the human to see what they would call them, to see if one might solve the problem of aloneness.

It must have been quite the parade—every creature different from the last. Each deserving of a name: lion, elephant, hummingbird, lightning bug. Scripture doesn't tell us how long it took, but it must have been days—both for the creation and for the wonder involved: a trunk that can spray water?! A bug whose butt lights up?! What will God think of next? Animal after animal, bird after bird, each named and known, but no counterpart found.

The problem isn't simply that the human is alone. If it were, the garden is now overflowing with life. The human is surrounded by creatures of astonishing beauty and variety, each a delight in its own right. What's missing is, in Hebrew, an *ezer kenegdo*. *Ezer* is often translated as "helper," but that can be misleading. Throughout the Old Testament, *ezer* is the term used to describe God when God is helping Israel. An *ezer* isn't an assistant or subordinate; it's someone whose strength comes alongside another. And *kenegdo* is an unusual little word that means something like "corresponding to," or "standing opposite." Put together, what the human is missing isn't a companion to keep them company or a helper to be their assistant. What they're missing is someone who can stand face to face with them, someone who can stand alongside but also stand against them. What is missing is a relationship so important, so central to who God has created us to be, that a second creation story is required.

Which brings me back to origin stories.

Yesterday marked the 250th anniversary of one of our nation's defining origin stories: the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It is a story that has long shaped who we, as a nation, understand ourselves to be—a people committed to freedom and willing to challenge tyranny, a people who believe that all are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights. It is a story worth remembering and celebrating because it reminds us not only where we came from, but what we value, and who we strive to be. But it is also a story that has too often been allowed to stand alone—too seldom made to stand face to face with the stories of those for whom freedom was not shared equally: stories of harm done to Indigenous peoples, to enslaved peoples, to those on the margins in every generation.

Before there was ever a story about a nation, Scripture told a story about a God who formed an earth creature from the dust, breathed life into them, surrounded them with a world of breathtaking beauty, and then said, "It is not good for the human to be alone." The deepest story we tell about ourselves is not that our grandparents crossed an ocean or that we grew up in a small town in Wisconsin; it's not that we served our country or even that we're American. These stories matter. They're part of who we are, and they deserve to be remembered. But beneath those stories is an older one: a story about a God who formed us from the earth, breathed life into us, and refused to call the story of creation complete until a counterpart was found. May that story give us the courage to listen to voices that challenge us, the humility to tell the truth about ourselves, and the grace to become the people God is still creating us to be.

Amen.