



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

It's Not Good in the Garden

SCRIPTURE:
Genesis 2:4-9,
15-25

May 7, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

For the next few weeks, we will be hearing some old stories that are found at the beginning of the biblical witness. But before we jump in, we need to recognize that these stories can be problematic. They were written in a different age and culture, when what was known of the world was different. So, translating their meaning into our own time can be challenging.

The first story is a story of creation, where God speaks a world into being—and does it all in six days. This story was carried by the wings of piety until Charles Darwin began to discover an alternate story of creation. One that took eons.

Darwin's scientific theory caused heartburn among some people of faith. It was a familiar heartburn—an ache that had been first experienced when Galileo testified that the sun did not revolve around the earth, but the earth actually revolved around the sun.

Some assumed this meant we had to choose between scripture or science. But if scripture is true, then there is no discovery of truth from any discipline that can be a threat. The battle with Darwin was a long time ago, except when it isn't. You may remember about 15 years ago, the Kansas Board of Education made it mandatory that science curriculum in the state of Kansas include the theory of Intelligent Design as an alternative to Darwin's scientific theory of evolution. It was bad science and an embarrassment for our state. It was worse theology—an embarrassment for the church.

These Genesis stories are not science books and to treat them as such reduces their truth. But the problems don't end there. Some have read these stories as history. Adam and Eve were the first couple. Their sons, Cain and Abel, and then after some time, Seth—the first brothers, which didn't go very well. We will

get to that in a couple weeks. Cain became the father of Enoch. Of course where his wife came from is something of a mystery, if this is history. But efforts to read these stories as history, again, reduces their truth. These stories tell us not of the first family, but theological truths of all families. But the problems don't even end there.

In the book "Eve & Adam," which is edited by theologian and friend of Village, Dr. Kris Kvam, along with two other scholars, Dr. Kvam points out that these stories raise troubling questions regarding the relationship between men and women. She notes that some have used these stories to diminish women.¹ Some have interpreted the story in Genesis 2 to suggest that since Adam was created first and from the dust of ground, but the woman was created second and from man, then obviously God thinks the man is superior, the head of the woman.² A more honest read is that it is not God who has thought that; it's men who have thought that. This, too, is terrible theology.

These stories are so problematic that we might be tempted to just skip over them. Let's find something that is less troubling. Believe me, when I began working on this message this week, I had that thought. But there is a richness, a basic honesty, within these stories that is relevant and important, and even though they were written thousands of years ago, there is a word for our day—right now—that we cannot ignore.

So, let's jump in. God looked down and saw that there was an incompleteness in creation. There was no garden, but before that could be addressed, there was a need for a gardener. So, God kneels down in the dirt and forms the human creature and breathes into the human creature the breath of life.

We know this as the creation of Adam, but you may have noticed that the name "Adam" does not appear

1 Kristen Kvam, Linda Schearing, Valarie Ziegler, editors, *Eve and Adam* (1999) p. 17.

2 Kvam, p. 392.

in the text. Why? Because ‘adam’ is the Hebrew word meaning ‘man,’ or better yet, ‘humankind.’ The story wouldn’t work if the guy’s name was Frank or Percival. No, this is a story about humankind.

Again, as Dr. Kvam teaches, ‘adam’ remains deficient.³ Why? Because he is alone. God says, it is not good that the human is alone. After God speaks light and stars and starfish and sequoias and even people into being—all of them being deemed good and good and very good—this is the first time something is not good. What is ‘not good’ in the garden is to be alone. So, God fashions a partner.

And when the human sees the partner there is incredible joy. “At last bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” To see one to whom you are connected, one to whom you belong, is the source of great joy. It heals that which is not good.

Verse 24 reads, “Therefore a man leaves his mother and father and clings to his wife...”. This verse sounds like the point of the passage—that the cure to loneliness is marriage. Well, for some it is, but if I understand the text, marriage is not the point but simply an illustration of a deeper truth. This is not about marriage; it is about relationship. We are not who we were created to be apart from one another. To be human is to love.

You may have heard the report this week from the Surgeon General declaring not only an epidemic of loneliness in the United States, but that it is killing us. Surgeon General Murthy said, “We now know that loneliness is... like hunger or thirst. It’s a feeling the body sends us when something we need for survival is missing.”⁴ Dr. Murthy stated the risks are comparable to the risks of obesity or smoking a dozen cigarettes every day. Our faith has taught us from the beginning that it is not good to be alone. Modern science indicates that it can be deadly.

Two brief takeaways from this ancient wisdom. The first: We need to pay attention to our relationships. No one walks through this life in a joyful fashion without friendships. This is so basic you would almost think we wouldn’t have to say it, but we do because relationships are difficult, complicated and

they are easy to take for granted.

On March 4, 1801, power passed from President John Adams to the new President Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson had been Adam’s vice-president. But Jefferson was concerned about Adams’ policies, so Jefferson ran against Adams in the election of 1800 and won. The campaign had been so bitter that these former friends ceased speaking to one another.

After a decade of silence, at the urging of Dr. Benjamin Rush, Adams broke the silence. He rose above his pain and wrote a letter to Jefferson. Jefferson, grateful to receive the letter, responded. This renewed the relationship and over the next 14 years, they wrote 158 letters to one another. The friendship was so dear, that John Adams’ last thoughts were of his friend. He said, “Jefferson survives.” He could not have known that five hours earlier Jefferson had died. It was July 4, 1826—50 years to the day after they signed the Declaration of Independence.⁵

We cannot be who God calls us to be alone. And friendships require intentionality. Today we welcome the Confirmation class. They will need us because like every life, they will have joyful times and they will have hard times, and no one can navigate all of that alone. But we will need them, too. We need the vision that they bring and the insights that they offer. We will need the hope they inspire in us.

It is not good to be alone and friendship needs to be practiced. Relationships require intentionality. A rule of thumb is let your heart show up on your calendar. Make time for those you love because love requires time.

Every month I create a task list for my life. They include different categories—a lot of work activities, but not just that. I track my fledgling attempts to exercise. I keep a list of long-term goals. I track the books I read. I track letters I write. I track finances; what we save and what we give away mostly. It helps me be intentional. I had been doing this several years before I realized that there was something missing in my monthly plan. I wasn’t tracking the time invested in my relationships. I was astonished. I should have started there first.

3 Kvam, p. 28.

4 Dr. Vivak Murthy, “Loneliness Poses Health Risks as Deadly as Smoking” Associated Press, May 2, 2023.

5 This story can be found on multiple websites. It is also recorded in detail in David McCullough’s *John Adams* (2001).

At the end of the day and at the end of our days, our lives are defined by who we love and how we love them. Let your relationships show up on your calendar. God would say that is good.

But there is a second, deeper, more mysterious takeaway from this lesson. When we meet another human, we meet ‘bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.’

Mattie Rigsby is a grandmother in Clyde Edgerton’s novel, “Walking Across Egypt.” She befriends Wesley, a teenager with a record. She meets him at juvie and they begin a rather unusual friendship. Mattie’s adult son Robert is not happy. One Sunday at lunch, he says that Wesley is a juvenile delinquent who will probably try to steal her car. She should forget about him.

“Robert, the gospel of Matthew says...” “Mother, I know what Matthew says.” “Well, you don’t know what I’m fixing to say... Whatsoever ye do unto one of the least of these my brethren you do also to me... Wesley is certainly one of the least of these, my brethren.” Robert replies, “Mama, you’ve already done for him. You already done I don’t know what. Doesn’t the Bible say when to stop?” Mattie responds, “No. Not that I know of.”⁶ Mattie Rigsby looked at Wesley and saw a child of God and it gave her joy. Robert, on the other hand, is still alone in the garden.

On April 13, Ralph Yarll, a 16-year-old Black boy

went to pick up his brothers at a friend’s house. He knocked on the wrong door and was shot. He was shot by Andrew Lester, an 84-year-old white man. Mr. Lester said he was afraid. Fear is a terrible thing because it is almost impossible to be our best self when we are acting out of fear. Fear may be a legal justification for violence, but it is not a moral justification. But we must ask ourselves: Why we are afraid? Was it racism? Of course. But make it more basic than that. He looked through the doorway and saw a Black child, but what he didn’t see was ‘bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.’ What he didn’t see is one whom God fashioned for relationship and love. And what he didn’t know was that he was therefore alone because that is what he chose and God would declare it not good.

When we see another, and fail to see ‘bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,’ the first thing God says is, “not good.” And we don’t need the Surgeon General to tell us that this is killing us. When the human creature is alone, it is not good, and it can be deadly. Salvation comes not just in marriage, and not just in friendships—as important as those are—but in seeing the human in the other. Seeing the other as one God has fashioned for love.

When we can see another and see ‘bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh,’ there is great joy and that is good.

6 Clyde Edgerton, *Walking Across Egypt* (1987) p. 175-177.