

Lent 1A: Genesis 2-3
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Original Betrayal, Original Grace

Watership Down, the best-selling novel by Richard Adams, is the story of a band of rabbits who leave their well-established warren after one rabbit has a premonition that something terrible is going to happen to their home. As the rabbits take off across the countryside in search of a new home, they face many dangers and are tempted to give in to their rabbit instincts to stop running and dig deep in the cool, cool earth. But they find courage in the stories they retell themselves, stories they heard as babies at their parents' knees, particularly the stories of the clever rabbit folk-hero El-ahrairah. In one such story, "The Blessing of El-ahrairah," Frith, the creator of the animals, calls a meeting of all the animals to give out gifts. Only El-ahrairah arrived late—he'd been too busy dancing, eating and mating (we are talking about rabbits here). Arriving at the meeting, he saw to his dismay that Frith had given out all the good gifts—to the fox and the weasel cunning hearts and sharp teeth, to the cat silent feet and eyes to see in the dark. Realizing that he would now be at the mercy of the other creatures, he ran away to hide in a hole. But he had only dug halfway when Frith came by, finding him with only his hind legs and tail above ground. Feeling a kinship with the mischievous creature, Frith decided to bless El-ahrairah's exposed bottom and haunches, giving him speed and strength. Then Frith declared, "All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you—digger, listener, runner, prince with swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks and your people will never be destroyed."

At first take, the "Blessing of El-ahraira" seems like a charming, "just so" story, explaining why rabbits have white tails and strong legs. But, as I said, the story plays a much more important role in the rabbits' journey. The "Blessing of El-ahraira" teaches the rabbits who they are, how they should see themselves, and what their task in life is. It is not to try to make the world safe, but rather to learn to live in a dangerous world by trusting in their speed, wit, and each other.

To the ancient mind, that is, the mind of those in the Ancient Near East, mythological stories of creation served the same purpose as the rabbits' stories. Stories of how the world came to be weren't about the past, as much as they were about the present, about the identity and purpose of those telling the stories. They are not to be taken as histories as we understand history or as scientific accounts. Those are modern concerns. Rather, they reveal truths that are deeper than the 'facts' of what happened thousands of years ago, truths about identity, who God is and who we are, and purpose, the ends for which we are made.

The Old Testament recounts two such stories of creation. The first, in Genesis chapter 1, describes the evolution of creation, starting from when the cosmos was formless and void, to the creation of planets and emergence of land, then plants, then animals, and culminating in the creation of humanity: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image and likeness of God he created them; male and female he created them." God gives them a mandate: "Be fruitful

and multiply and exercise dominion over other creatures.” And God concludes his work, declaring it, “good, very good!”

The second creation story, from Genesis chapter 2, is what we just read as our first lesson. Here God starts with man in mind. God creates man, *ha adam*, from the earth—a human made from humus—and gives him life by breathing into him. God then places the *adam* in a garden paradise that God made especially for him and sets him up as master of Eden. The *adam* quickly gets to work exercising his dominion by naming the other creatures that God brings before him. But among them he finds no fitting companion—An ox? No. Monkey? Not so much. Dog? Close, but no. So God causes a deep sleep to fall over the *adam* and then undertakes some divine surgery—taking a piece from Man’s side, splitting him in half, to make Woman—his literal counterpart. And the two then live in harmony with the creatures in Eden. That’s the set-up for the second creation story.

Taken together, these two creation accounts portray humanity as having a special place, a special role in creation. Indeed, in both, humanity is presented as the pinnacle of creation, the highest of the creatures and the very reason for creation itself. It’s *for man* that everything else was designed. In contrast to other ancient creation accounts on offer at the time, such as the Babylonian story which pictured humans as slaves of the gods, Genesis describes humanity in exalted language, as being made in the “image and likeness” of God.

Scholars over the centuries have puzzled over what exactly that phrase means, but it’s clear that humanity is alone in having this quality. Most likely what the original hearers would have thought of were the statues that emperors and kings set up in lands they conquered. These statues bore the “image and likeness” of the ruler and were put up to remind the subjugated people who was in charge. For the same purpose, God made humans in his own image and likeness to be living statues, not just to remind creation of its Creator, but to be God’s stand-in, his surrogate, his agent and viceroy on earth, executing God’s will in God’s name. Orthodox Christians have striking way of understanding this role. They see man as the ‘mediator,’ the go-between between heaven and earth. They envision man as standing at the center, mediating, representing God to creation, and representing creation back to God serving as ‘priest,’ offering thanksgiving to God on behalf of creation, and as ‘prophet,’ communicating God’s order and will to the world. Talk about a high calling!

To add *another* dimension to this charge—because you don’t have enough to chew on—Bible scholars see God establishing in Genesis 1 and 2 a ‘covenant’ with humanity. Covenants, in the time of Genesis, were formal agreements between a high king known as a suzerain, and his vassal, a subordinate prince. Such agreements lay out the rights and responsibilities of each party. The sovereign usually promises protection in return for the vassal pledging loyalty and obedience. Following this structure, God takes the role of king and establishes man as his vassal, his representative, to administer God’s will in the world.

Now, as far as covenants go, the covenant of creation is admittedly not especially onerous. The only thing Adam and Eve are to work the earth and watch over it, and enjoy the fruits of the land, except for the fruit from *one* tree. They can eat from any other tree—from the apple tree, plum tree, cherry tree, pawpaw tree, pomegranate tree, whatever—just not that one tree, the Tree of the

Knowledge of Good and Evil. But of course, even that one simple prohibition was too much. In eating the forbidden fruit, our primordial parents did more than just give in to their baser instincts, more than let their appetites get the better of them—what they did was break faith with God. They tore up the covenant agreement and declared they were going to make their own rules from now on. The consequences for this rebellion were serious, as they were wide-ranging.

Adam and Eve immediately knew shame and alienation, hiding from each other and from God. When God found them, he described further consequences for their rebellion. For Eve, it came in the form of painful childbirth and subordination to her husband. For Adam the punishment was having to earn his bread by painful toil among the thorns. But the effects rippled out from there. Because humanity stands at the center of the world, as the lynchpin between creation and the Creator, Adam and Eve's disobedience broke that connection, causing the whole order to come crashing down. East of Eden, the world is no longer a fruitful paradise, but has become a thorny and inhospitable land. Whenever I have to tear out briars in my yard or cut back swaths of poison ivy, I have to bite my tongue to not curse our first parents!

But again the truth of the story is not found in its *historical* accuracy. The reality is we don't need to identify the moment of the fall in human history, or to be able to locate the Garden of Eden on a map, to recognize the truth of this story, to appreciate how well it describes human nature after the fall. I mean, it's plainly and painfully obvious that we live in a fallen world, a world where it is easy to do evil and hard to do good, easy to hurt others, and hard to heal their wounds, easy to arouse suspicion and hard to win trust. We are each conditioned by our solidarity with the human race in its accumulated wrong-doing and wrong-thinking. And to this legacy, we have each added our own deliberate acts of sin.

For a book written over thousands of years ago, Genesis presents an amazingly clear-eyed and honest account of human nature. We are creatures who've been given amazing privileges, entrusted with the highest office, and granted tremendous gifts with which to execute that office. Yet, we keep throwing those honors away, wasting our gifts and distorting their purpose, because we don't trust God's goodness.

And the crazy thing is, God hasn't given up on us. The original calling God issued to humanity at creation—to be God's image, God's representatives in the world—still stands. God's purpose for humanity hasn't changed. The *covenant* is still in effect.

That's the thing about covenants, and why I've chosen to focus on them this Lent--covenants are how God declares his ongoing commitment to his people. You see, a covenant is not a contract. When a contract is broken by either party, the contract is considered null and void. That's because contracts are transactional. Covenants by contrast are transformational. A covenant establishes how the parties will relate, how they will be, *who* they will be for each other. So just because one party breaks the terms of the covenant, that doesn't mean that the other party ceases to be who they are, it doesn't change how the party relates to other. The covenants that God establishes bind God to God's people, and God's people to God. 'They will be my people and I will be their God' is the repeated refrain each time God establishes a covenant. To be sure, God's interactions with his people are not limited to covenants, but covenants are where God makes clear his intentions to his people, and his expectations for the relationship.

As I said, it's a wonder that God hasn't given up on us a long time ago, wiped the earth of humans and started over with, I don't know, raccoons or something. But he hasn't. He just forgives and recommits.

Even here, in the story of the original betrayal, God shows our ancestors grace. He goes searching for them when they hide, he covers them with animal skins—which are a lot less itchy than fig leaves—and he escorts them out of Eden, lest they eat from the Tree of Life and be forever fallen. It's an act of mercy, really. But before he does that, he gives them a ray of hope, a glimpse into how God is going to redeem the broken relationship. As he lists the consequences of the fall for Adam, Eve and the serpent, God makes a comment that has a deeper meaning than it first appears. Addressing the serpent, God says “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.” More than explaining why humans are afraid of snakes—as if we needed an explanation—what this declaration offers is a sneak peek at what God's future will hold: The serpent, the tempter, Satan, will forever “bite at the heels” of the children of Eve, causing pain and death in the generations to come. But Eve's offspring, indeed one in particular, will crush that serpent's head. That one of course is Jesus. Jesus is the son of Eve who will finally break Satan's power. He will put an end to the tempter's reign and establish a new creation, a new humanity, and a new, eternal covenant between God and man. Here we get the first glimpse of that good news, the first hint at the Gospel. Even then, as God is heartbroken over the rebellion of his beloved creatures, he already had in mind a way to get them back, a way to restore them to the place of honor.

We will see in the coming weeks how God unfolds this plan, how even when his people let him down, God commits himself again and again to restoring the breach. Indeed the whole rest of the Bible is aimed at showing us how God never gives up on us, no matter how far we fall. Now, if that isn't good news this Lent, I don't know what is. Amen.