

Genesis 2:4b-17, 3:1-8

What is the most beautiful place you have ever seen? What makes that place so beautiful? There are many beautiful places in this world, in spite of our pollution and environment. But a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, tornado, or hurricane, can turn a potential paradise into a disaster area.

Before earthquakes, tornados, floods, forest fires and human desecration, there was a beautiful place on planet earth, unlike anything our eyes have ever seen. It was a paradise, “a garden”, located in a place called “Eden” the original home of humanity on planet earth. This is where it all began. After a first, poetic account in Genesis 1, Genesis 2 and 3 offers a complementary narrative account of the beginnings of creation.

Together these three chapters present creation through a bifocal lens that affirms both the profound, inherent goodness of creation (Genesis 1) and the complexities and ambiguities of life within that good creation (Genesis 2-3). However, the creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 seem to contradict each other. They present two different perspectives of the same story. Genesis 1 gives the *chronological* account of what God made on each day, with man being created on the sixth day. Genesis 2 gives a *descriptive* account, with man being the central theme, and is not meant to be chronological. The two stories describe a similar event from two distinct points of view. One is concerned with the big picture, the other with a few tantalizing details; one sees the entire forest, the other a few trees. Genesis 1 is the wide-angle lens; Genesis 2 is the close-up zoom.

The land was not yet suitable for the human race and had to be prepared for their habitation. There was no vegetation, no rain, and no cultivation so God prepared the garden, making it ready and poised for humans to enter the scene.

“Then the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground.” The term *“formed”*, *“yasar”* in Hebrew, describes the activity of a potter. God is pictured as a potter that shapes and molds man from the dust. This word implies deliberation, tender loving care and attention to detail. God created with His hands, not just His words. Man is a work of art! God is intimately involved in the creation of human life, gracing us with dignity, value, and worth.

God forms Adam out of “dust,” or adamah, reflecting humanity’s lowly origin. Even though humans were created in God’s image, they were creatures just like all the other creatures God had created. From a strictly financial standpoint and without God’s energizing power, the chemicals in the average human body are not worth very much. Yet, while we are “but dust” we are priceless to God!

Not only is God a potter, He is also an animator. God breathes the breath of life into Adam. “Breathed” is warmly personal, with the face-to-face intimacy of a kiss. The “breath of life” was God’s breath that gave Adam life, spiritual understanding, and a functioning conscience. Adam’s life came from God’s breath, making him a combination of dust and divinity.

After God made the beautiful garden, fully stocked with its full-grown vegetation, he put Adam in it. The Hebrew word here translated “put”, implies rest and safety as well as devotion in God’s presence. God put

Adam in the garden where he could be safe and rest, where he could have fellowship with God.

The creation of humankind appears very different from the creation in Genesis 1, where God speaks creation into life. However, with man's creation, "formed" and "breathed into" indicate a hands-on and personally intimate involvement. Not only were human beings created in a special way, but God had planted a special garden for them to dwell in and tend. We see a special act of creation producing a special creature, who is placed into a special setting and given a special work to perform. All these details are intended to impress upon us the loving and intimate involvement of God with humanity.

God then gave Adam three mandates. The first two dealt with responsibility and the third one dealt with access to garden privileges. The first area of responsibility is indicated by the word "tend" which means "to serve". The details of this service are not given but we do know that, before Adam was created, there was no one to tend the garden. God placed Adam in the Garden for the purpose of serving God. This word - to tend - is also translated "worship" elsewhere in the Old Testament. This shows that Adam served and thereby worshipped God by tending the garden.

Even though the human being's appearance precedes that of other non-human creatures, this earth creature is not given "dominion" as in Genesis 1, but is called to "serve" the ground, "*abad*" in Hebrew. Translations have obscured this fundamental relationship between 'adam' the human and 'adamah,' the dust from the ground'. In one translation: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it, other translations have: "to work it", "to farm it", "to cultivate

it". "Abad" is connected to worship and when in this context is reduced to "till", "work", "farm", or "cultivate", it loses its meaning "to serve" the Garden of Eden, to "work for" it. Genesis 2 pictures the human's role not as ruler but as a groundskeeper, or tenant farmer.

God ordained work. All kinds of work — paid and unpaid — are necessary in the world for us "to subdue it" according to God's will. Even if daily responsibilities may seem dull and unimportant, or cause one to associate with and support worldly, God-hating people, it is important to remember: "the Lord takes pleasure in His people". And God takes pleasure in us not just at church, but at work as well. We need to enlarge our vision of our spiritual life to include our daily work and activities. *"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance."*

In Genesis 3, the great central act of disobedience is introduced. In choosing to disobey God's command, the humans radically alter their perception of themselves and of their world. Their eyes are opened and they become self-aware. Where they had been living in a theocentric, that is God-centred world, now they believe they live in an anthropocentric, or human-centred one, in which they can assert themselves as the centre of value, decision-making, and knowledge. The knowledge they gain from eating the fruit results in alienation in their relationship with God as well as the soil, the adamah to which they are integrally related.

God had warned Adam, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden - except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die." It seems that God tells Adam, alone, that the

fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil must not be eaten. One can only conjecture as to how effectively God's command to Adam was communicated to Eve, as this detail is left out of the story.

But, there is a positive aspect to this command: "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden." God gave humanity the enjoyment of all of the luscious trees in the garden. It was an all-you-can-eat buffet smorgasbord. He says, "Go for it! Enjoy My creation!" God says the same thing today. We are free to do anything but sin. God is a fun God; God is a good God.

Yet, "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" is not an evil tree in itself. All of God's creation was pronounced "good". "Good and evil" does not brand the tree as partially sinister. When we say we "search high and low", two opposites are chosen to include everything in between. The knowledge of good and evil involves the whole moral spectrum, just as the Tree of Life is related to the full spectrum of living. This unique tree grants the ability and power to determine what is good and what is evil, which is God's prerogative alone. God has never delegated moral autonomy to any of His creatures.

So the temptation to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree was to seek wisdom without reference to the word of God. It was an act of moral autonomy, deciding what is right without reference to God's revealed will. It was seeking wisdom outside of the word and will of God, usurping God's role in determining what is right and wrong and sidestepping God's word in order to become wise.

After warning Adam, God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." God determines that it is not good for Adam to be alone. Everything up

until this point was called “good” but now God says, “It is not good.” However, there is no indication that Adam himself was dissatisfied with his circumstances. He is likely oblivious of his own need.

“So the Lord God formed from the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and the man chose a name for each one. He gave names to all the livestock, all the birds of sky, and all the wild animals. But still there was no helper just right for him.”

By giving names to the animals, Adam is studying their nature. It is as if Adam is looking to see whether any animal can be an adequate companion for him or is like him.

After making his evaluation, God proposes a solution. God will provide a helper for Adam. God already is Adam’s Helper (but a superior Helper). The animals are also Adam’s helpers (but inferior helpers). This helper, then, must be one that will be equal to him. The term “helper” does not mean a servant. Jesus used the same word to describe the Holy Spirit who would help believers, following his ascension. It means one who supports us in our task of doing the will of God. It is not a demeaning term since Scripture often uses it to describe God Himself.

And let’s face it ... we need help in every arena of life. When the time came for a strategic decision during His ministry, Jesus made an interesting choice. He gathered 70 workers and sent them to various towns to prepare people for His visits. He could have sent each disciple separately and reached more towns. Instead, He chose to send 35 teams of two. An efficiency expert might criticize that decision for duplicating effort and cutting productivity in half. But Jesus knew that some ministries

are performed best by two not one. When two people work together, one can protect the other. One can encourage the other. Two can split the work, offset each other's weaknesses, and draw on each other's strengths. Companionship makes two more effective, not less, than one.

Now, Adam's companion is to be suitable for him. God meets Adam's need: "So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. God then took one of the man's ribs and from it made (the Hebrew is, literally, "built") a woman and brought her to the man." It has been said, "God created man and said, 'I can do better than that', and then created the woman." This brings new meaning to the expression "our better half". To paraphrase the poet Mildred North: "Woman was not taken from man's head, to rule over him, nor from his foot, to be crushed by him, but from under his arm, to be protected, and from near his heart, to be loved." This brings a whole new meaning to the term "prime rib".

Now Adam has a helper in the Garden. He probably explained to Eve the instructions from God and about eating from the one forbidden tree. According to popular interpretation or misinterpretation of the story, the serpent is the devil sent to tempt Eve who then uses her sexuality to entice a gullible Adam into falling with her into sin. If you recall the reading you heard this morning from Genesis 3, that is not what it says.

The serpent is identified as "shrewd". The serpent's motive is unclear. What is clear is that the devil or Satan does not appear anywhere in the biblical text. This is a theological interpretation added about 200 BCE in the *pseudepigrapha*, which are falsely attributed works or texts whose claimed author is not the true author. This literature also brought the idea that the "Fall" was exclusively the fault of Eve who then seduces her man. None of this is part of the biblical text.

Now the serpent is not inherently evil. When the woman and the serpent speak, both use plural pronouns. “We may eat of all of the fruit...” and in response the serpent says, “You (plural form) will not die.” The woman eats and “also gave some to her husband, who was with her and he ate it.” Even though the woman speaks, she appears to be speaking for both indicating that the man was right there all along. The seduction we all know so well, is interpretation, not text.

Our story ends with: “Now the man and his wife were both naked but they felt no shame.” This beautiful text describes the openness that existed between the first man and the first woman. Nothing was hidden. The naked condition of Adam and Eve does not just describe their unclothed, physical appearance. It also refers to the physical and psychological oneness and transparency that existed in their relationship. Physically they were naked; they shared their bodies with each other openly. Psychologically they were not ashamed; they hid nothing from each other. They were at ease with one another without any fear of exploitation for evil. Transparency should increase with trust, commitment, and friendship. It involves communicating what we know, think, feel, and are with the person or persons we choose.

It’s interesting that not much is said in this passage about the spiritual needs of humanity: our need for a place; our need for food; our need for freedom, which is related to the spirit; our need for meaningful activity; and our need for work. Perhaps the reason we don’t see much stress on the spiritual aspect is that before the Fall, humans were such tremendous spiritual beings that a spiritual relationship is going to be there naturally.

How terrific it is to go to the New Testament and find that when one or even all of these dimensions of life are not being met, Christ steps in to

meet the dimension that is lacking. If a person is lacking a companion, perhaps through grief, Christ steps in to fill the void. He's the friend who sticks closer than a brother. If there is a lack of a place, Christ is there.

Paul wrote about this in 2 Timothy. He's in a dungeon cell, but in his heart he is in Eden. If the early Christians were without food because they were hounded for their faith, Christ made the difference and met that level of need. If there was lack of meaningful activity — many of the first century Christians were slave labourers and their jobs were not meaningful — Christ made life meaningful.

All through the Scriptures we see how Christ fulfills the basic needs of life. Beyond the simply physical and emotional and intellectual understanding of the passage, we recognize that deep within the centre of us there is a magnet that calls out to the fact that there is a vacancy in us that only God himself can meet and fill. In Christ, full revelation of God has taken care of those of us who live on the other side of Eden.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR SEPTEMBER 8, 2024

Creator and Redeemer, as we approach you in prayer, make us walk in beauty and balance. Make us open our hearts and minds. Make us speak the truth. We pray for your community, the Church, the Body of Christ. We pray for all our relatives in the circle of life throughout all Creation, for those chosen to be our leaders and teachers. In Peace we pray to you.

We call upon the Earth, our planet home, with its beautiful depths, soaring heights and deep waters, its vitality and abundance of life; we call upon the mountains and deserts, the high green valleys and meadows filled with wild flowers, the snows, the summits of intense silence, and we ask: That they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the land which grows our food, the nurturing soil, the fertile fields, the abundant gardens and orchards; we call upon the forests, the great trees reaching strongly to the sky with earth in their roots and the heavens in their branches, the fir and the pine and the cedar and we ask: That they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the creatures of the fields and forests and the seas, our brothers and sisters the wolves and deer, the eagle and dove, the great whales and the dolphin; we call upon all those who have lived on this earth, our ancestors and our friends, who dreamed the best for future generations, and upon whose lives our lives are built, and with thanksgiving, we call upon them too: That they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the nations of the world to hear the cry of those who have suffered loss of homes, lives and hope because of climate change. May they hear the cry of those whose schools, churches, hospitals, roads and infrastructure have been damaged. We pray for justice and for peace.

We pray for our common home, our planet and all who seek to ensure its wellbeing. We pray for justice: that all nations of the world will work together for the common good of each person and our planet; that conservation will enable habitats to flourish while meeting the needs of local communities; that we each understand the impact we have upon the earth and adjust our lifestyle accordingly.

We pray for all victims of war and violence; for countries where the greed for oil and gas are leading to war. We hold in our hearts those areas where fossil fuel projects have destabilised communities and human rights abuses have occurred. We pray for areas where climate change has led to drought and conflict over water and resources. May we respond to the cry of the Earth and those living in poverty, as peacemakers who challenge the violence that threatens us all: We ask that they may teach us and show us the way.

We pray for those who mourn, ease the suffering of all who are lonely or in pain, for those who need healing, especially Bishop Kathy and Pastor Kristin Steele. Give them strength to overcome setbacks and heal and surround them with your love and compassion so that they may return to serving you and your people.

We pray for: Faith Lutheran in Powell River, and Our Saviour's Lutheran in Prince George; for Bishop Kathy, Bishop Susan, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers as they lead their congregations in these challenging times of climate change and natural disasters around the world; for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

We pray that God sustain those who respond to wildfires, floods and natural disasters. Keep them safe from harm and hold them in God's sheltering embrace so that they may complete these burdensome tasks, return home to their families, and keep the lives and homes of all they protect safe from harm.

We pray for all the evacuees, those who have lost their homes, and those waiting to return to survey the devastation, that you give them strength and hope to rebuild their lives and communities.

We pray for parents around the world who reach out in hope for their children. We pray for justice: when they struggle to provide food for their families; when they cannot find a place to make a home for their children. We are grateful for the temporary cease-fire in Gaza, allowing the children to be vaccinated for polio and pray that they receive their next dose with another temporary cease-fire.

We pray for ourselves, Disturb us and disquiet us with a passion for justice. Challenge us to grasp a vision of Your new world and motivate us to act to birth it into being. Enable us to pass on the gift of hope, so others are empowered to continue the journey of faith.

Creator, you made the world and declared it to be good: the beauty of the trees, the softness of the air, the fragrance of the grass speaks to us; the summit of the mountains, the thunder of the sky, the rhythm of the lakes speak to us; the faintness of the stars, the freshness of the morning, the dewdrops on the flower speak to us. But above all, our heart soars, for you speak to us in Jesus the Christ, in whose name we offer these prayers.

Amen

LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father ...