

"Pushing Beyond Limits"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, January 2, 2011

My son asked me one time, "If God created the world, then who created God?" It's a great question. Of course, I was just trying to get him to brush his teeth and go to bed; I wasn't looking for an existential conversation about creation. But in the bright gaze of a child's relentless questions, adults can be queried beyond the limits of our knowing. They ask us questions about things we usually don't think about, that we often take for granted. This month at All Souls we'll be talking about the theme of *creation*, which includes ideas about where we came from and, therefore, what we're meant to do. On this first Sunday of the month, I want to introduce the theme with a broad look at creation from the Biblical perspective.

But the way I want to do it is like a child. I want to ask the questions that many of us did not get to ask in Sunday School, because the teacher would either shut us up or kick us out for even suggesting such questions. This message might seem a little irreverent at times, but I want to take a *good look* at the *Good Book* this morning, with new eyes, without limits. And I've got some questions that may push you beyond the limits of your understanding of the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. In the next four weeks, I'll be exploring issues related to creation such as environment, evolution, and the nature of creativity itself. But today I want to tackle the creation story from the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, to see what it can teach us. Of course, if you're a student of the Bible, you might be wondering which version of creation from the Bible I plan to discuss.

How many of you were thinking that? If you didn't know, there are two creation stories in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis in the Bible that completely contradict each other. I'm going to show you how in a minute, but first let me make one thing perfectly clear: the Bible story of creation is *not* meant to be an historically accurate account. The writers of the Bible put two contradictory stories in the first two chapters just to make absolutely sure (from the very beginning) that no one would ever confuse these stories with some kind of literal or historic truth. If we are looking for a scientific,

astrophysical account of our beginnings, we will not find it in the Bible. However, what you will find are many timeless truths about life and how to live.

Keep in mind that nearly every culture and society has a myth similar to the Garden of Eden, which often involves a golden age at the beginning of time when people lived in close relationship with Gods; a time when there was harmony, and no disease, no death, and no discord. The Greeks have the story of Pandora, who (like Eve) is said to be responsible for the world's misfortunes, because she disobeyed the order not to open the box out of which all the troubles of the world came. The Blackfoot Indians (on this continent) have a tale of Feather-Woman, who unleashes boundless troubles and disease when she digs up the Great Turnip after being told not to. And for doing it, Feather-Woman is cast out of Sky-Country, which is the Blackfoot version of paradise. So the story of Adam and Eve is not unusual in this way. It's in part what's called a "Just So Story" that seeks to explain why things are the way they are. We hear in the children's story this morning the story the Cherokees tell to explain why rabbits have short tails. There are stories about why leopards have spots, and of course, why women have pain in child birth. These myths take something that already exists and tell a story to explain why they are the way they are (and we find them in every culture.)

Every time I read the Bible, I discover something new. What I discovered while reading Genesis this week was that it's not really so much about the beginning of time as it is about the beginning of a relationship. It's really an amazing love story. It starts out:

1 In the beginning god created the heavens and the earth.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

*4 God saw that the light was good,
and he separated the light from the darkness.*

You should know that in Hebrew, the word "God" has no gender (male or female)...now this may be a powerful God, but this is not an omniscient God; it's not an all-knowing God. Look what it says: "God saw that the light was good." You'd think God would already know it was good. I made it. I'm God, it must be good! But no, the God in Genesis, chapter one, keeps saying after each day of creation that he saw it and it was good.

This is a God of discovery, who creates and then assesses what he creates. On the second day it says:

*10 God called the dry ground "land,"
and the gathered waters he called "seas."
And God saw that it was good.*

The story makes it sound like God's thinking, "Hey, that's not bad. Let me try something else..."

*11 Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation:
Seed bearing plants and trees [...] And it was so.
And God saw that it was good.*

Eventually, after a couple more days of creation:

*24 God said, "Let the land produce living creatures
according to their kinds [...] And it was so.
26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness."
27 So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

Did you hear that? In the first book of the Bible, God created men and women at the same time. Co-equal, both together. These humans (both male and female) were the very last of God's creations.

Genesis 2 And God rested on the seventh day.

Then, in verse four of Chapter Two, begins the second version of creation in the Bible. It begins:

4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created,

What? I thought we just heard the account? Let's see what it says:

*Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth
and no plant had yet sprung up,
for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth
and there was no one to work the ground.
7 Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life
and the man became a living being.*

Wait a minute...didn't we just read that man was created *after* the shrubs and trees and *after* the other animals on the last day of creation? And now it's saying man was created first! I'm confused. So let's keep reading:

*8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden:
and there he put the man he had formed.*

*9 The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground –
Trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.*

[It says]...

*In the middle of the garden God planted two trees:
The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

[...]

*16 And the LORD God commanded the man,
“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;
17 but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil,
for when you eat from it you will certainly die.*

So we've got the first rule: don't eat from that one tree or you will die. We don't know is it poisonous, prohibited for some other reason. One rule, that's all he has to remember. Here's the real kicker:

*18 The LORD God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.
I will make a helper suitable for him.”*

Now wait a minute...a few lines before, it said that God created both man and woman, together he created them. Now it says he is alone and God wants to make a helper for him. So in this version, God creates man first, then the trees, then the woman? Let's read on:

*19 Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground
all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky.
He brought them to the man to see what he would name them;
and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.*

I like this version, because God lets the person help with the naming. God creates something, then says, "Look at this one! What shall we call it?" Now God is not so alone; God has a partner to create with. They're having fun!

*20 So the man gave names to all the livestock,
the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.
But for Adam no suitable helper was found.*

Here we go again, this is not an "all-knowing God." You would think God would have known that these animals would not be suitable mates for Adam, but God seems not to know it. This is a God that uses trial and error, and seems to learn as he goes. As a

matter of fact, in this version, God is a revisionist. In the first account, God sees his creation and it is good. In this one he sees it and says, “You know, it’s not good for the man to be alone.” Again, God seems surprised by his creation, and sees mistakes in his creation, and sets out to fix them.

Next it says God causes Adam to fall asleep, and then takes one of his ribs and uses it to create the woman. This second chapter ends with:

*25 Adam and his wife were both naked,
and they felt no shame.*

Pretty good situation: you’re a healthy, naked, beautiful couple who have no shame, and you’re in paradise. Let’s not mess this up! Oh no, just when life looked like Easy Street, here comes a serpent – that talks.

Genesis 3

*1 Now [it says in Chapter 3] the serpent was more crafty
Than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.*

*He said to the woman, “Did God really say,
‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”*

2 The woman said, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,

*3 but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree
that is in the middle of the garden,
and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”*

4 “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said.

*5 “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened,
and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

Here we have the first religious debate in recorded history. Notice how the serpent does not challenge what God said, he only challenges what God intends. He accepts what God said, but challenges its truthfulness. He challenges God’s motive.

I can hear my son asking, “How does the serpent know so much about God and the tree? Did not God put him in the garden? Has he eaten of the tree? Is God really in charge of this garden?” God’s absence during this conversation raises questions about the intention of God’s prohibition against eating from the tree. Why would God put the tree there if God did not want them to eat its fruit? Is it a test? Is God trying to discover the extent of human loyalty? If so, why do it with a counterintuitive command with no explanation?

Or is it that God did not anticipate the disobedience? Again, this is not an omniscient or all-knowing God. In which case, the placement of the tree, in retrospect, is a colossal blunder. Or is it that God really does want them to eat the fruit, but cannot tell them? Maybe they are like growing children who must break free, even rebel, to establish their independence and maturity.

The next thing that happens is that when God discovers what's been going on, the man blames the woman and the woman blames the snake...and we begin the first game of "passing the buck." But what's interesting is that we don't hear from the snake at this point. If God had asked the serpent, "What have you done?" the serpent might have responded back: "What have *you* done?" The serpent might have said, "I just told them the truth, you did not tell them the whole truth. I gave them the truth so that they could decide for themselves." The serpent might have asked, "Why did you put this tree in the garden? Why did you allow me to talk with them?" or even, "Why can't you stand for anyone else to be like you?"

The interesting thing about it is that the serpent *did* tell the truth – he was right. God's real motive was that they not become like gods by knowing good and evil. God says it a few lines later. That's why some see this story as a "figurative tale" of growing up from childhood to maturity? As parents we don't like it so much, when our children reach the years of discretion and start to argue with us, and disobey us, and seem to have minds of their own. And yet, we also know that they need to go through this stage of differentiation or else they'll remain dependent forever. We want our children to grow up and take initiative and think for themselves. One way to look at this story is as an allegory for the process of human maturity, rather than a story about sin, corruption, and defiance.

The Bible describes that Eve reaches for something that is nourishing, beautiful, and a source of wisdom...how is that a bad thing? In fact, this act of independence presents the possibility for a real relationship between humanity and God, rather than one of puppet and puppeteer. There's no real relationship if a person does not have free will to choose to be in the relationship. Why would God want a humanity that's completely dependent and mindlessly conformist? And maybe that's why God is silent in the scene

with the serpent. Because God really does not want humanity to be innocent and ignorant forever.

And from the human side, living in a paradise with “no wants” would be like being a dependent little child forever. It would be a paradise without science or art, or any of the kinds of things that come from rational distinctions and dissatisfactions. The only reason to think that this was not God’s intention is that God gives out punishments for each of them, because they ate from the tree. But are these really punishments, or are they the “just so stories” that seek to explain why something is the way it is: why we die, and why women have pain in childbirth, and why snakes are silent and have no arms and legs. I find it interesting that it really is because we have knowledge that women have pain in childbirth – the reason human childbirth is so difficult is due to the size of the human brain, which has tripled in size over the past two million years.

If nothing else, Genesis describes a God that believes it’s not good to be alone. And a God that realizes that once we create something, we can no longer be autonomous, unaffected, and dispassionate. Creating something creates an intimate and emotional connection. The first time Creation was our theme of the month, in Sunday School the children invented their own creatures with clay. And the end of class, they were told to try to breathe the breath of life into them (which of course did not work). And then, the kids were told it was time to destroy their creations. You should have seen their faces; there was no way they were going to destroy them. Kids were hiding their creatures behind bookshelves...anything but destroy them.

Rev. Debbie Blue reminds us that in Genesis, up until man is made, “...everything was created by sound...” [but] suddenly God decides to get his (or her) hands dirty when God creates humans. God did not think us into being, but “God had God’s hands all over the dirt, rolling it...spitting on it to wet it...to mold the lips...and form the toes.” (Blue 66). This is an intimate relationship. She goes on to say, “This is a God who, like us, comes to realize that when we decided to be in a relationship (and especially to have children) we accept that there will be someone always aroundf messing up the house, interrupting our time alone, breaking our things, breaking our hearts. Having

children means there will be ‘blood on the walls and mud on the carpet.’” (Blue 66) Why does God do it? Why do any of us do it? For love.

The Bible says we are created in the image of God. That image is love. Genesis is not so much a story about the beginning of time, as it is a story about the beginning of a relationship. One founded on love, which by definition is messy, and which, for better or worse, pushes us beyond our limits time and time again. May the new year bring you many beginnings, and many opportunities to exceed your limits and your love.

Amen.