

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC
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The Garden of Eden
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I realize that I'm stating the obvious here, but you do know, don't you, that we do not have any eyewitness accounts of the creation of the world. It's not like there was some reporter standing around watching and taking notes as God created the pole star and the Pleiades; as God made penguins and porpoises; peach trees and pomegranates...and people. The only one there to witness it all—this miraculous, blooming creation—was God, the Creator.

And so since we do not have an eyewitness account of what took place at creation, what do we have? These creation stories found in the book of Genesis—why are they there? Well, one thing we can say is that they are NOT there to give us a scientific explanation of how creation happened. Genesis is not a science book. These stories in Genesis are not intended to satisfy a scientist's curiosity about exactly how and when everything came into being, to explain the Big Bang, and the kinds of questions scientists ask. In fact, just to make sure that we are clear about that, the writers of Genesis have given us two accounts of creation, and put them side by side. Genesis 1 describes God's act of creation in one way, and the Garden of Eden story found in Genesis 2 and 3 tells about creation in a totally different way. (If it is news to you that Genesis gives us two different creation stories, find some time this week to read Genesis 1 and then read Genesis 2 and ask yourself questions like: When in each story was the man created? When was the woman created? When were the plants and animals created? And how long did it all take? What you'll find is that each of these stories answers those questions differently.)

So, if these stories are not intended to explain how and when creation took place, what is their purpose? These stories are here to tell us about God. These are not scientific statements; they are theological statements. There's really only one right question to ask about these stories: what do they tell us about God? So with that question in mind, let's look again at the familiar story of the Garden of Eden.

As the story in Genesis 2 opens, the earth is a rather barren and desolate...and lonely...place. There weren't any plants or animals yet. God had not yet caused it to rain, and there was no one to till the ground; it was not a very inviting place. So God decided to do something about this bleak place. First, God created the man—we call him Adam because that's the Hebrew word for "man". And then God planted a garden. You can imagine God's delight as God creates all these wonderful things and places them in the garden—juicy mango trees and sweet-smelling rose bushes and giant sequoias. It was lush and green and beautiful. So God took the man and plopped him down in the middle of this beautiful garden, and gave him a job—to till and keep the garden. (Frankly I don't think it was all that difficult a job: all Adam had to do was to

drag a hoe across the ground and this beautiful loamy soil, perfect for growing things, turned up.)

So let's ask our question. Up to this point in the story, what do we know about God? Well, here's what we know: God is creator. Everything that exists exists because God wanted it so. Another thing we know about God is that God is full of life and delight and joy, and simply loves bringing things into being.

So God placed the man in the garden and told him to have at it, "Adam, everything you see is there for the taking, for you to enjoy. Well, almost everything. There is this one tree—that one over there in the middle of the garden, that one you must leave alone. In fact," God said, "if you eat the fruit from that tree, you will die."

So now what do we now know about God? Well, we know that God gives bountifully, but God also sets limits.

Now for awhile, everything was fine. God watched Adam stuffing himself on grapes and olives and avocados, and all seemed well. But God observed something about the man—the man was lonely. And for the first time, God declared something "not good." You remember how all through the first creation story it went like this: "God saw the light and it was good." "God saw the sun and moon, and it was good." "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." But now, for the first time, God saw something and said, "That's not good." The man didn't have a companion to share this wonderful garden with, and God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." So God decided to do something about that.

Now what happens next is, I think, one of the funniest scenes in the Bible. God decides to make a companion for the man so God creates one animal after another to see if it will serve as a suitable companion. Hippopotamus? No, not that. Duck-billed platypus? No, not that either. Dog? Well, getting closer. Man's best friend, but not really a suitable companion for the man. Animal after animal God paraded before Adam, but none was really right as a companion.

So God decided that something else was needed. God put the man into a deep sleep, took out a rib, and from that rib, God created the woman. Now at last here was the companion with whom the man could share this beautiful garden.

What do we know about God? That God cares about the creatures that God has made. God sees our need, our loneliness, and God works to make us whole. God made us to be in relationship with other people.

Life in the garden was wonderful. Food was plentiful. Companionship made life in the garden a delight. But of course, there was always that tree. Every time Adam walked to the pond, he couldn't help but glance over at it. It looked pretty much like all the other trees; he couldn't see any reason that God would tell them to keep their hands off.

So when the day came that the woman brought to him something to eat and told him it was fruit from the forbidden tree—that she had taken a bite and nothing bad happened—Adam too took a bite.

And in that moment everything changed. That evening when God came to take a stroll in the cool of the garden, the man and the woman hid from God. They'd never done that before. They hid because they were ashamed. Up to this point everything had been so natural, so free, but not so any more. Now they were embarrassed by their nakedness, so to cover their vulnerability and their shame, they sewed fig leaves to cover themselves, to hide from God. At once, God knew what they had done and that things would never be the same again.

So God spelled out for them the consequences for their disobedience: hard labor for the man and harder labor for the woman. The life of ease that they had known in the garden was no more.

And as this scene comes to a close, you see God with needle and thread sewing clothes for the man and the woman. Let me read you the verse one more time. This is Genesis, chapter 3, verse 21: "And the Lord God made garments of skin for the man and for his wife, and clothed them."

I've tried to imagine God sitting there sewing on these garments and thinking, "I told them not to mess with that tree, but they did it anyway. And now their lives will never again be like it was in the garden. And those fig leaves aren't going to provide them much protection. They need some proper clothes."

Back to the question once again: what do we know about God? We know that God is so full of grace and love for God's people that God's response to their sinful disobedience was not to say, "I told you so...too bad for you." Instead, God set to work to give them what God knew they needed. One writer said it this way,

There's something we see over and over again in the Bible: God's deep and abiding interest in working with and for human beings. God is so committed to working with us and for us that God works inside our own limitations, even the limitations of our sin (Winner, *Wearing God*, p. 35).

One thing that this story of the Garden of Eden tells us about God is that God does not let even our sinfulness keep God from loving us and from giving us what God knows we need.

I'm going use the last couple of minutes of this sermon to go someplace that may seem totally off the wall. But once I got this picture of God stitching the garments for Adam and Eve, I found myself thinking about other places in the Bible where clothes are a symbol of the presence and grace of God. Here are some I thought of:

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, when the wandering son comes crawling back to his father, having wasted the inheritance he had been given. He's smelling of pig sty and wearing torn and ratty clothes, and the father calls to his servants: "Bring a ring for his finger and shoes for his feet and the best robe for this son of mine." Here's this totally undeserving son, and the father pulls out all the stops to welcome him home. The father does not let the son's

unworthiness keep the father from loving and caring for his son. And the clothes the father gives are a symbol of that love and care.

In another parable, Jesus tells about the King who is throwing a huge wedding banquet for his son. The bountiful banquet table is set, the wine is poured, everything is ready, but for some reason the people who had been invited decided not to come. And when those who had been invited don't show up, the king tells his servants to go out into the city streets and round up everyone they can find and bring them into the party. No time to waste...round them up and bring them in, "the good and the bad" the parable says. The servants do what they're told, so now the banquet hall is filled with guests who have been brought in off the streets, and they are all adorned in clothes fit for the king's son's wedding. Since they didn't have time to run home and put on their Sunday best, where did their wedding clothes come from? The only thing I can figure is that the King opened his closet and told them to pick out whatever they wanted to wear. The clothes were a gift from the king. A room full of undeserving people adorned in the best that the King has to offer. The clothes are a symbol of generosity and grace.

One more: there's the line in Romans 13 where Paul tells us to "put on Christ." In Christ we have the perfect example of God's abundant grace. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." "It was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us." The scripture that Katelyn read earlier said, "As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." Put on Christ, the perfect example of God's forgiveness and love.

So what do we know about God? We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even our own sinfulness. We know that in Jesus Christ God proved once and for all that God loves us and that there is nothing we can do which will make God stop loving us.

That evening in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were naked and ashamed, and they needed clothes to cover their shame. So God took out needle and thread and made garments for them. That's what love looks like. •