

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

First Sunday in Lent • March 1, 2020

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 • Psalm 32 • Romans 5:12-19 • Matthew 4:1-11

Last summer, the New York Times *Magazine* published a special issue entitled the “1619 Project” marking the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first African slaves in Virginia. The backlash was not long in coming. Some historians, people who are well-acquainted with the historical record, claimed that the authors had misrepresented events to fit into their own narrative. Talking heads on cable news, people who are well-acquainted with their own righteous indignation, claimed the entire idea was anti-American. One U.S. Senator went so far as to claim that the Times *Magazine* had become an American Pravda.

If you understand this as an argument about historical facts, a story about an event that happened four centuries ago, this visceral reaction is kind of strange. There are dozens of history books and articles published every day which are met with little comment or fanfare. But it’s really not an argument about historical facts. It’s an argument about our beginnings. Jake Silverstein, the editor in chief of the *Magazine* even made this explicit when he wrote that slavery “is sometimes referred to as the country’s original sin, but it is more than that: It is the country’s very origin.”

Origins matter. The stories about where we came from have an enormous influence in how we construct our identities. We believe that if we want to understand who we are, we need to go back to the beginning. When we want to understand our country, we interrogate the values it was founded on. When we want to understand our families, we track down information about our ancestors. When we want to understand our faith, we go back to how previous generations of people lived during difficult times.

And so it is with Genesis. When we want to get down to basics, we go back to the garden. These creation stories are important to us not because they explain everything, but because they tell us the most fundamental things about ourselves. This is actually kind of a nice fit for Lent, when we strip down some of our decorations and liturgy and so that the most essential things become clearer. What are the most fundamental we can say about God? And what are the most essential things we can say about being human? Let’s start with God.

One of the things that’s unusual about this creation story, a story that is trying to tell us about who God is, is that God is never described in it. The whole story is narrated in the third person, but at no point does the narrator step back and tell us what God is like. If someone asked us to talk about what kind of God we believe in, we would probably say something like, “God is loving, and God is just, and God is caring.” These are some general qualities that God has. And you might even tell a story about how God acts in a way that reveals that character. “God is caring. Like this one time, God led the Israelites out of slavery. And that showed how caring God is.”

The author of this creation story flips that on its head. Instead of describing God in general terms, God acts. God “formed man from the dust of the ground.” God “planted a garden in Eden.” God “made to grow every tree.” We know who God is because we are told how God acts. So instead of starting with any preconceived ideas we have about who God is, the author starts with what God actually does.

The upshot of this is that God is never addressed as an “it.” There’s never a point in the story where you can set yourself outside of it and say, “I’m going to be a neutral observer here and just think about God in theory.” Because as soon as the author starts talking about God’s actions (God planted. God formed. God grew.), they are saying that this is a story you are involved in. This is not just a story. This is your story. Which means God is never an “it,” because God is always a “you.”

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And we learn something about us, too. What are we told about humans? They aren't described either. We're not told anything about eyes or elbows or brains or even souls or any of the things we normally make us human. We're told that God takes the human, the *admah*, this gender-neutral person, and puts them in the garden "to till it and keep it." The important thing, the fundamental thing we can say about people, is that they have a purpose. Humans exist *for* something. We exist to participate in God's act of creation. So humans are, in some very fundamental way, like God. God acts. And humans are invited into that same ongoing action.

But that way of being like God isn't a lot of fun. Sharing God's vocation means you have to be responsible for the welfare of other people. It means you have to care for the environment. It means you have to live within creation instead of just on top of it. The fun way to be like God is to not have any limits. The garden is good and all you need to thrive, but it would be even better if you could eat from the tree of knowledge. It would be better if you could have access to everything just like God. How does the snake put it? Eat the fruit of the tree and you will become "like God." The snake, who unlike God is described by the narrator, tricks Adam and Eve. But the snake doesn't trick them into eating the fruit. The snake tricks them into thinking that they aren't like God to begin with. That they way they're like God isn't good enough. That just sharing God's vocation isn't enough. You have to have the power to take what you want. You have to have access to everything.

It shouldn't be lost on us that paradise is lost when people decide that they should be entitled to everything under the sun. If there is power to be had, it must be for me no matter who has none. If there is oil in the ground, it must be extracted no matter the cost. If other people have labor, it must be gotten no matter the price. So many of our social, ecological, and economic crises come from our overreaching. God gives us something good and we decide to try to make it great. When we ignore the story, we repeat all its mistakes. We try to become like God in all the wrong ways.

One of the tragedies of American religious history is that we have made this story which is of universal importance into a theological wedge issue. For the last hundred years, evangelicals have made taking these stories literally a litmus test for true believers. And we mainline Protestants have responded by dunking on evangelicals because it makes us feel intellectually superior and, let's be honest, it's just kind of fun. But by going out of our way to not take this story literally, we often fail to take it seriously.

And so we miss the gift that God gives us. The most fundamental thing about us. Which is that the thing that makes us human is not something we have to come up with, but the invitation to join in God's ongoing work of creation. Which means that we never have to justify our worth in terms of our economic productivity or our social standing or our cultural relevance. What makes us human isn't contingent on other people. It comes from God. You have a vocation and a purpose that no one can take away from you. You have a shared mission, a shared objective that makes you like God.

That's our beginning. That's our origin story. It's a story about Adam and Eve, who didn't exist, except that they exist in all of us. It's not just their story. It's our story. The story of where we came from and the story of where we're going. So become like God. And stay human.

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