

Creation

Genesis 2:4b-10, 15-23 In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up-- for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground-- ⁷ then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰ A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." ¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ¹⁹ So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."

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Today, we begin to hear about and study a series of significant events and important people in the Bible. You might think of this series of sermons as chapters in a Bible Story Book, but a Bible story book for adults. Sometimes we may think that we're familiar with a story in scripture. But when we go back and read the passage we find parts that we've forgotten since we were children in Sunday School, and sometimes we see significant details that weren't part of our childhood lessons. I hope that together we'll listen with fresh ears so that perhaps we'll hear the scriptures like it's the very first time we've ever heard them.

Together, we just read the first chapter of Genesis as a responsive reading. Then we heard much of the second chapter read. (Just a quick reminder, here – chapters were not designated until the early 13th century and then verse numbers were added in the mid 1500s. It isn't unusual for a story or subject to spill over into another chapter.) You might have noticed that Genesis 1:1 through Genesis 2:4 is very different in style of writing than the rest of the second chapter of Genesis. The first passage about creation, Genesis 1:1 through 2:4 is much like a poem, with rhythm that sort of sets it up in stanzas with repeated phrases at the end of each stanza. This is why it really works well as a responsive reading. The second passage about creation is written more like a story than like poetry.

The vocabulary is different in the two passages. The most notable difference is how God is spoken of. Up through 2:4, it is always God, *elohim* in the Hebrew. Beginning in 2:5, it is always Lord God, *adonai elohim* in Hebrew. Really good Hebrew scholars take notice when there's a clear shift in the style, the vocabulary, and/or the name used for God in the scriptures. If you were reading a book and one chapter was written in Appalachian hillbilly dialect, the next chapter was written in Shakespearean English, and a third chapter was written in hip hop slang, you'd think that it was highly likely that three different people wrote the chapters, and at three different times. Those kinds of language clues indicate that these two passages in Genesis were very likely written at different times.

The Creation passage that begins at chapter 2, verse 4 was probably written sometime around 1000 BC, during the years when King David and King Solomon ruled over a united Israel.

The third difference between the two passages is in the sequence of creation. Compared to the clearly spelled out order of creation found in chapter one, the next creation passage presents a different sequence of events. Man was made before the plants. The male human was made at a different time than the female human. The male human needed a partner - and so the animals were made to see if any of them would fit the bill. None of them were suitable, and only then was the woman was made using part of the man.

Let's look more closely at the second passage. It says, "In the day that the LORD God made the earth . . ." We might want to take note that the word day here is singular, just as it is in chapter one. It doesn't say, in the days that God made the earth. In the Hebrew, the word in both passages about creation is the same and it's singular. We might want to ask ourselves, if the seven days mentioned in chapter one are to be understood as 24 hour days, then is this also a 24 hour day?

Before there was any vegetation, the LORD God formed man from the dust. The Hebrew carries more meaning. It says that God formed the *adam* from the *adamah*. We are "dust-persons." Adam is a generic word for humankind and humans are dust-people. This is why it's appropriate when in a funeral or memorial service it's said that from dust we come and unto dust we return.

God planted a garden and put the dust-person in it to till it and keep it. The *adam* is to be the caretaker of the garden. We might get the impression that tilling the land means to plow it up, but the original language is richer than that. The Hebrew means to work or even to serve. The man is to work the garden, serve the garden, till it, yes, but in the sense of taking care of the garden. It says he is to keep the garden. If we keep the vegetation of the earth, that certainly does not mean that we are free to destroy whole species of plants, strip huge areas with no thought to long term consequences, or otherwise be short-sighted and heavy handed in dealing with the earth's vegetation.

Next, God declared that the man needed help and set about to make him a helper. Helper doesn't mean "a servant." In Psalm 121 it says, "I lift up my eyes to the hills-- from where will my help come? ² My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." God is our help, but most certainly not our servant. So we should not misuse this creation account to try to make women subservient. Women might be tempted to remind men that help in the scriptures often refers to keeping someone out of trouble. (see Ex 18:4)

In order that the dust-person would not live alone, God set out to make him a helper, a partner, it says, and God formed all of the birds of the air and animals of the field. These were all brought to the man to see what he would name them. This means more than we might think today. To name someone was to have some amount of influence, sometimes even power or ownership in some way. God is declaring the man's status or control or responsibility over the animals.

We tend to overlook the presence of humor in scripture and here's an example. The man is looking for a helper, a partner, a companion. Is he really supposed to consider the duck-billed platypus? How about the aardvark? Possum? Geese are territorial and make good sentries, but that's about it in the help department. Otters are really cute and amusing, but not a lot of help. The most promising animal might have been the dog. But even the help and companionship of a dog has its limitations. With due respect to Rogers and Hammerstein, do you suppose this adam, this dirt-dude, burst into song with, "There is nothing I can name that is anything like a dame?"

At this point, it says that God gave the man a strong anesthesia and performed a "rib-ectomy" on the man. As a child I was told that men had one less rib than women, or that they were missing a rib on one side. Let me set the record straight. Everybody has twelve pairs of ribs - except for a few people who are born with eleven pairs or thirteen pairs of ribs, and those cases are not linked to gender. Taking a rib isn't the point here. The point is equality and companionship and unity. The woman isn't portrayed as a separate creation, a different animal of some sort. We should disregard, in fact, it would be good to refrain from, all of the jokes and snide remarks that men make about women - and women make about

men - that characterize the opposite sex as weird, dumb, or deficient in some way. Such talk tends to perpetuate bad expectations and bad behavior. Nor is woman made from the man's heel to indicate lower status or from his head to signify that she's above him. The metaphor is clear; she is the same as he is in nature; she is from the side - to be beside - him. Through the centuries both men and women have tried to ignore this when it suited their own purposes.

Looking at the account of creation found in the second chapter of Genesis, we've found that it's quite different from the account of creation in chapter one. The language is different, including using a different name for God. The writing style is different. The time frame is one day rather than seven days. The order in which creation takes place is different from chapter one.

One lesson here is that the name Adam is simply a term for humankind that can be loosely translated as "dust-dude." And humankind is given the responsibility of working, serving, keeping, and caring for the garden of vegetation in which we are placed. Then the animal kingdom was made and humankind was placed in relationship to the animals. Finally, a vivid illustration instructs us that men and women are to live as equals, not as master and servant.

The first account of creation was a wonderful responsive reading this morning. Next week we'll explore the riches found in that account and draw more lessons from both passages. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
The table is sagging with a bountiful feast.
Don't insult God by turning away from what God offers you.
Make wise use of your time.
Come. Eat and be filled. Grow stronger in the Lord.