

July 19, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

So, Why Are We Here, Anyway?
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Genesis 2:6-17

Comments before the sermon:

Every now and then it is good to look again at the creation passages in the Book of Genesis. I say passages because, of course, there are two distinctly different accounts of creation which we find side by side. Some of the differences are obvious: in the first account, man is created **after** everything else. In the second, man is formed **before** everything else.

The first passage is poetic, and has recurring phrases, "and evening and morning were the first day; second day; third day," "and God saw that it was good."

The second passage is not poetry. Instead, it is story, narrative, drama. It is this narrative form that I want us to pay attention to this morning as I read the beginning of the second creation story - Genesis 2:6-17.

Sermon:

One summer day when I was pastor at a church in Jamestown, New York, a family came to the church seeking financial help. They were from Texas and had traveled to Jamestown on the prom-

ise of employment opportunities. Having been disappointed in the job search, the family was heading back to Texas and needed some money. In the course of our conversation, I asked them if they had a church home in Texas. The man said they had been very active in a particular congregation, but the church had had a theological disagreement and they had left. On further probing, I learned that the church had split over a question that was asked in a Sunday School Class. The question concerned the passage we just read. A student in the adult class asked the pastor if Adam had a belly button. The pastor said yes, and that led to a theological fight which eventually split that church.

True story!

The Adam and Eve narrative has been as misused and misinterpreted as any text in the Bible. Of course, it is meant to be taken seriously, but not literally. One commentary challenged me to strike a bargain with you and tell the story and nothing more. That seemed a little extreme.

I mentioned that the Adam and Eve story is a drama. There are four scenes. This morning we deal with just the first scene. Let me read part of it again, this time from the Message Bible, which is printed in your bulletin:

At the time God made Earth and Heaven, before any grasses or shrubs had sprouted from the ground—God hadn't yet sent rain on Earth, nor was there anyone around to work the ground (the whole Earth was watered by underground springs)—God formed Man out of dirt from the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The Man came alive—a living soul!

Then God planted a garden in Eden, in the east. He put the Man he had just made in it. God made all kinds of trees grow from the ground, trees beautiful to look at and good to eat. The Tree-of-Life was in the middle of the garden, also the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil.

God took the Man and set him down in the Garden of Eden to work the ground and keep it in order. God commanded the Man, "You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don't eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you're dead."

I hope you heard what was said in the last three verses about Adam in the garden.

Verse 15 – Adam, man, humankind, has a vocation: the human creature is to care for and tend the garden.

Verse 16 – Man has permission: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden..."

Verse 17 – Man has a prohibition: "You shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

Vocation, Permission, Prohibition. These three verses together provide a remarkable statement of anthropology. They answer one of life's most important questions: Why are we here?

Human beings before God are characterized by vocation, permission, and prohibition. The primary human task is to find a way to hold the three facets of divine purpose together. Any two of them without the third is surely to pervert life.

Let's take a closer look. Why are we here? We are here, first of all, for vocation. The word vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, "to call," and means the work a person is called to by God.

Frederick Buechner points out that, "There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of society, say, or the superego, or self-interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need to do and (b) that the world needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a); but, if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored or depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a), but probably you aren't helping your patients much either."

Jack Martens is a band teacher of teens in San Francisco. For 33 years he has braved the challenges of less-than-ideal teaching conditions at Ben Franklin Middle School to live out his faith. Over 50 percent of Martens' students are from broken homes, on welfare, and from families where English is not the first language. And, funding for the arts has been all but cut off in Jack's school district.

Still the 56-year-old, bearded band teacher shepherds his students through the less-than-green pastures of life. "I love these kids," he says. "And, they seem to love me." He eats lunch with his kids to help them talk through their problems. He stays after school to help them with difficult fingerings on their instruments. Through the mechanics of music he is able to show his students they are capable of something beautiful.

Why are we here? We are here for vocation. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

We are also here for permission - for joy, for delight. God has made a beautiful world and her intention is that we are to enjoy it.

In his book *Forged by Fire* Bob Reccord writes:

I had a severe cervical spinal injury. The pain was so excruciating that the hospital staff couldn't do an MRI until I was significantly sedated. The MRI showed significant damage at three major points in the cervical area. Because of the swelling of injured nerve bundles, the only way I could relieve the pain was to use a strong, prescribed narcotic and to lie on bags of ice. Sleep, what little there was, came only by sitting in a reclining chair.

Approximately forty-eight hours from the onset of the injury, doctors estimated that I had lost about 80 percent of the strength in my left arm. Three fingers on my left hand totally lost feeling. The slightest movements would send pain waves hurtling down my left side and shoulder. I had to step

away completely from my work (which I love) and wear a neck brace twenty-four hours a day for five weeks.

About halfway through that experience, I was sitting on the screened-in porch behind our home. The day was cold and blustery, but I needed a change of scenery. Suddenly a bird landed on the railing and began to sing. On that cold, rainy day, I couldn't believe any creature had a reason to sing. I wanted to shoot that bird! But, he continued to warble, and I had no choice but to listen.

The next day I was on the porch again, but this time it was bright, sunny, and warm. I was tempted to feel sorry for myself when suddenly the bird (at least it looked like the same one) returned. And, he was singing again! Where was that shotgun?

Then it hit me: the bird sang in the cold rain as well as the sunny warmth. His song was not altered by outward circumstances, but it was held constant by an internal condition. It was as though God quietly said to me, "You've got the same choice, Bob. You will either let external circumstances mold your attitude, or your attitude will rise above the external circumstances. You choose!"

Why are we here? First, we are here for vocation—to do a job where your passion and the world's need meet. Second, we are here for permission—for joy and delight in all of God's good creation. And finally, we are here for prohibition. We have limits. "You can eat from all the trees in the garden except that one in the center." We are here to practice restraint. There are limits; there are fences.

Raynald III, a fourteenth-century duke in what is now Belgium, was grossly overweight. His Latin nickname, Crassus, means "fat." Raynald's younger brother Edward revolted against Raynald's rule. Edward captured Raynald, but did not kill him. Instead, he built a room around Raynald in the Nieuwkerk castle and promised him he could regain his title and property when he left the room. This would not have been difficult for most people, since the room had several windows and a door of near-normal size, none of which were locked or barred. The problem was Raynald's size; to regain his freedom, he needed to lose weight.

Edward knew his older brother. Each day he sent a variety of delicious foods into the room. Instead of dieting his way out of prison, Raynald grew fatter. When Duke Edward was accused of cruelty, he had a ready answer: "My brother is not a prisoner. He may leave when he so wills." Raynald stayed in his room for ten years and wasn't released until after Edward died in battle. By then his health was so ruined that he died within a year — a prisoner of his own appetite.

We are to enjoy God's good creation, but there are limits. God gives us the Ten Commandments and other prohibitions which rather than confining us, free us.

The Book of Genesis tells us that "God took the Man and set him down in the Garden of Eden to work the ground and keep it in order.

"God commanded the Man, 'You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don't eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you're dead.'"

Why are we here? We are here for vocation; we are here for permission; we are here for prohibition.