

I have always been fascinated by origin stories. An alien baby crashes to the earth and is adopted by a human couple. Due to the different atmospheric conditions on earth, he is gifted with super strength, flight, and the ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound. A nerdy high school student gets bit by a radioactive spider and suddenly is imbued with the ability to climb buildings, leap great distances, and shoot super strong spider webs from his wrists. A wealthy child watches his parents die, and after being raised by the affable butler, funnels his fortune and his PTSD into crimefighting gadgets that allow him to take on what appear to be superpowers. Each of these familiar origin stories is accompanied by the idea that – as Peter Parker’s Uncle Ben taught him – with great power comes great responsibility.

These origin stories are the single most powerful tool we have in understanding these characters. Knowing how they got their powers and what (often tragic) events led them to their lives of heroism gives us great insight into who they are and why they battle their particular enemies. Many of the most iconic and enduring superheroes of all time are still best defined by the original story that made them who they are.

In *The Superhero Reader* (yes, that’s a real book! I get to do fun research sometimes!), the editors write, "Almost all superheroes have an origin story: a bedrock account of the transformative events that set the protagonist apart from

ordinary humanity.... To read stories about destroyed worlds, murdered parents, genetic mutations, and mysterious power-giving wizards is to realize the degree to which the superhero genre is about transformation, about identity, about difference, and about the tension between psychological rigidity and a flexible and fluid sense of human nature."

Our biblical tradition gives us an origin story for all of humanity...well... actually, it gives us two. Genesis 1 and 2 offer two similar, but significantly different views of the origin of creation and of human beings. In the story from Genesis 1 that we heard this morning, God creates the earth and all that is in it before creating humanity. Humanity is created as a whole – male and female in one fell swoop – in the image of God. God blesses them and gives them dominion over all the animals. God gives the seeded plants to the humans for food and the green plants to the animals. God gives directions for appropriate division of and care for natural resources. And it was good... no.... it was *very* good. On all the other days of creation, God looked at what had been accomplished and proclaimed it good. On the sixth day, after creating the animals and humanity, God said it was *very* good. The Genesis one creation story ends with this sense of awe in all of creation. From the smallest creature to the largest – from the simplest to the most complex – it's all just so very good.

In Genesis 2, we get a different order of creation. God creates the man first, and then – it seems - all of creation is made to try to make the man happy. God planted Eden in order that the man might have somewhere nice to live and something to do. God created the animals and charged the man with naming them so that he might find a companion among them. Finally, God created the woman out of the flesh and bone of the man himself, and only in her – and her reflection of himself - did the man find his partner. In this story, man is created by God– but not explicitly in the image of

God, and it is only in the creature created in the image of man himself that man finds a worthy companion. There is no sense of awe. No sense of responsibility. No creation in the image of God. And no reference to the inherent goodness of what God had created. And, it is in this story that it all falls apart – the serpent, the fruit, the fall.

You see, we often take these origin stories of humanity for granted. We are told that God took the man and put him in the garden to till it and keep it – at least that's the translation we have in our pew Bibles... But, here's where that Hebrew I had to take in seminary complicates things and casts a very different light on this biblical mandate. If we take this particular translation to be authoritative, it sounds as though God put the man in the garden and told him to start ploughing, planting, weeding, fencing in the animals, driving away the pests – basically whipping the land into submission for whatever use and abuse the man deemed necessary.

But, these Hebrew words are more complicated than that. First – let's talk about this idea of tilling the land. The root of the word used here is *abad*. Some English words we use to try to capture the translation of this word, in the context of a garden, are “till, work, cultivate.” But the actual meaning of this word, more generally used, is “to serve.” The man was put in the garden *to serve* it.

Turning to the word translated “keep,” – well that's kind of a weird thing to say about a garden. “Keep” it. What does that even mean? Does it mean possess it? Hold on to it? Figure out where the borders are so we can be sure which land is mine and which is yours? The Hebrew word used here is *shamar* – which is more accurately translated “guard and protect.” With this in mind, when we look at Genesis 2, we see that the man was placed in the garden to serve and to guard and protect it.

Three years ago, Pope Francis released an encyclical on climate and justice. The goal of this statement was to invite dialogue with all people about our common home. It's a deep and rich theological statement, and if you haven't had a chance to read it, I encourage you to do so. Among other things, he addresses the creation stories in Genesis, and specifically the idea that the earth was created to serve the needs of humanity. He says that Christians have misinterpreted Scripture and "must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures." We were created to serve, guard and protect God's creation.

That is our origin story – the story that tells us where we came from and who we are called to be. We are not called to dominate creation. We are called to shepherd it.

And throughout the scriptures we are given ample testimony to what a shepherd does. A shepherd serves, guards, protects. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The good shepherd knows her sheep and they know her. The good shepherd gathers all of their sheep to them so they can be one flock. The good shepherd guides the sheep through the darkest valley and seeks the lost sheep until it can be brought safely home. The good shepherd feeds the flock and gently carries the little lambs. The sheep are wholly dependent upon and wholly trusting in the shepherd, and the shepherd recognizes the responsibility that comes with that power. The shepherd cares for that with which he is charged – even at the risk of his own life. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep – putting the preservation and continued safety of the flock ahead of his own desires and even his own life. This is the image in which we, as humanity, are created.

We also must recognize that we, as shepherds, are tasked with serving and guarding something that does not belong to us. The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it –

the Psalmist says. The land, the very earth we live on is a gift from God. A gift that comes with responsibility. A gift that comes with the expectation that we will not use the world as though we think we created it ourselves. An expectation that we will hold on to that sense of awe in the created world.

The other thing to note about this gift of creation is that it is not a simple gift – like a birthday present – with no strings attached. It's more like a bequest, a trust, an endowment. With a simple gift, when it is given, it is yours to do with as you wish. It is intended for your personal use and enjoyment. An endowment, on the other hand, is intended to be invested and used in small increments. An endowment is meant to support the community long into the future. With an endowment, you are allowed to use a small percentage each year toward the support of the organization. If you go outside that small percentage, the money gets used up and is not there to support the future generations of people you hope your organization will serve.

The gift of creation is like an endowment. It is not given to us for our use and enjoyment alone. We are trustees for future generations. We should be investing in our creation. We should be conserving the resources we withdraw. We should be finding ways to replenish what we take. A healthy endowment should grow and flourish – not diminish and disappear.

Kentucky born poet and essayist Wendell Berry wrote and spoke often about the concern he had for the way that humanity neglects and abuses creation. Recognizing that we must use natural resources as a means of survival and thriving as a species, he challenged us to approach our use of natural resources as a holy thing – a sacramental thing. “To live,” he said, “we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. When we do it knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, destructively, it is a desecration.”

As shepherds of creation, we are gifted with the expectation that we will benefit from the use of her resources. However, we are also tasked with using those resources responsibly – in such a way that we preserve and protect this earthly endowment for the generations to come. When we live into the image of God – the Good Shepherd – when we care for what has been entrusted to us, God proclaims it very good. When, as in the second account of creation, we take on a sense of entitlement as the firstborn of creation for whom all things were created, we fail to serve and protect and guard our inheritance.

In this story of creation, God creates everything in an attempt to satisfy the man's desires, and, sadly, the man only seems satisfied by an outcropping of himself. In an all too human narcissistic response to creation, it is only when he sees himself reflected that he feels he has a worthy partner. And even that satisfaction is short lived. It doesn't take long before the man and the woman seek to exploit the resources at hand. They eat from the tree they were told to leave alone, and they cast blame on the serpent. In an insatiable need to satisfy the desire of the moment, they take without consideration for the future of the creation with which they were entrusted.

Superheroes aren't the only comic book figures with origin stories, you know. Supervillains have origin stories, too. The common thread in these stories is some sort of very tragic loss that results in an anger born of a feeling of having been deprived of something the character was entitled to. This leads to a sense that, since the world is out to get you, you'd better get it first – a sense that you should take what you desire without consideration for the future or the well-being of the rest of the world. In the second creation story, the serpent convinces the first people that God has denied them access to the one thing that makes God special – the knowledge of good and evil. The one tree they were told not to touch becomes, for

them, the thing they must have, the thing they deserve, the thing they are entitled to. And, whatever the consequences, they will have it.

Origin stories. Which of these origin stories speaks to you about who humanity has come to be? Which speaks to you about who we were created to be? How are we defined by these stories? And how do we want to be defined?

Are we created in the image of God? Are we created to exist harmoniously with creation as we serve and guard and protect it? Or is the earth created simply to sustain and satisfy us? Are our natural resources there to be used for our desires and enjoyment and then tossed out? Are we worried about the fact that, based on current trends, we cannot assure future generations an adequate supply of clean air, safe water, or a healthy food supply?

One final thought from Wendell Berry – “The Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of the it and to foster its renewal is our only legitimate hope of survival.” Hold on to that sense of awe in creation friends. Remember that what God created was and is very, very good.

Amen.