

The Stories We Tell

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Genesis 2:4b-25

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We are starting a sermon series titled “Beginnings.” Over the next few weeks, Pastor Lauren and I will be preaching through the first twelve chapters of Genesis, listening to how our story begins.

A few years ago, our family stopped at Wind Cave National Park in the Black Hills (you have a photo of Wind Cave on your bulletin. Some of the Lipperts would have been good cave dwellers, but others of us, not so much. Despite our mixed feelings about caves, we stopped at this National Park to have a look around.

As we started the Wind Cave tour, we were told that we were entering sacred ground. The opening of Wind Cave, and Wind Cave itself, is a part of the creation story of the Lakota people. My pastor antennae were up.

The cave is where the Lakota people emerged from Mother Earth. I’m going to share pieces of the story told by Sina Bear Eagle, you can find the story on the Wind Cave National Park website.

This story begins at a time when the plants and the animals were still being brought into existence, but there were no people or bison living on the earth.

There were two spirits who lived on the surface of the earth: Iktomi and Anog-Ite. Iktomi, the spider, was the trickster spirit. Anog-Ite, the double face woman, had two faces on her head, one lovely and one horrible.

The trickster spirit is bored, and convinces the woman that they should play a trick on the human beings who are waiting in the spirit lodge, Oniya Oshoka, where the earth “breathes inside,” the depths of Wind Cave. The humans are waiting for the earth’s surface to be prepared for them.

The woman agrees to play a trick on the humans. She loads a leather pack filled with berries and meat onto her wolf companion Sungmanitu Tanka. The wolf goes inside Wind Cave, the spirit lodge, to find the humans. The wolf tells the humans about the wonders of the earth’s surface. The leader of the humans, Tokahe, the first one, says they will not go, because the Creator has told them to wait and stay underground. Most people stay with Tokahe, but all those who taste the meat, want more meat, and they go to the surface with the wolf.

The surface is beautiful, but the humans soon realize they have been tricked. They have to work to survive and the work is hard. As winter approaches they are starving. They complain and the Creator hears them. The Creator says, “why did you disobey me. Now I need to punish you.” The Creator turns this small group of humans into the first herd of bison.

As time passes, the Creator invites the human beings onto the surface, and instructs them to follow the bison. Everything they need would come from the bison.

This story has religious themes that we will recognize in our own our faith’s origin stories. In the Lakota emergence story, there’s a trickster Spirit who is bored, there’s human disobedience.

There are gendered themes that aren't helpful, that of the two-faced woman. There's guidance for life. For the Lakota, a people with nomadic roots, the guidance is to follow the bison, they are a gift from the Creator that will provide everything. In this story, as important as knowing where human beings come from is knowing the origin of the bison.

It is helpful to hear our creation story from Genesis for today alongside other creation stories. When we hear creation stories this way, our perspective shifts. We no longer hear them as God's one story about how the world began. Rather, we hear them as the stories human beings tell to answer the questions, "where did we come from, who we are and who should we be?" We listen for the Word of God in these stories that human beings tell. We may like some of the answers given by these stories, and we may not like others. That's fine. We are making sense of our lives with God and one another, just like our ancestors were.

First, let's talk about Adam and Eve and that rib transplant. If we know our Bibles, we may remember that God already created men and women in Genesis 1. On the 6th day, in chapter 1 verse 27 we read, "So God created humankind...male and female God created them." Men and women appear to be created independently of one another. There's no mention of a rib. If you read Genesis chapter two carefully, you see a variety of things that don't fit with Genesis chapter 1. In Genesis 1, for instance, animals are created before human beings. Well, how can that be when in Genesis 2 the animals are created after the human being. That's one of the major points of Genesis 2, that human beings need companionship. That's why we have the whole naming ceremony of the animals and the realization that animals aren't adequate for companionship and another human being must be created. That's not the concern of Genesis 1. Which is it? (That's a question I'd like to ask of the Creation Museum in Petersburg, KY).

What we have are two completely different stories in Genesis 1 and 2, coming from different traditions that are linked together. It's like the difference between the Lakota creation story centered in Wind Cave, and the Ojibwe creation story of Kitchi-Manitou, Nokomis (Sky Woman) and Turtle Island. Different stories asking and answering different questions.

As we know some of these details about our scriptures it becomes easier to hold Adam and Eve lightly. We can say, "I prefer some of the messages coming out of Genesis 1 instead." That's fine.

I do think, though, there is an aspect of Genesis 2 that is pointing to life for us now in the same way that the instruction to follow the bison is pointing to life in the Lakota story.

As much as the Wind Cave story is told by and for a nomadic people, the 2nd chapter of Genesis is told by and for an agricultural people. In verse 5 we are told, "no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb had yet sprung up - for the Lord God had not yet caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground.

This is being told from the perspective of a people who have domesticated plants and herbs and are growing them, who till the soil and wait for the rains because the rain literally gives them life.

This is very different than the Wind Cave story that begins "before there were people and bison." In Genesis 2, God breathes life into Adam, the human being, and the very next thing God does is plant a garden, Eden. Waters flow out of the garden, including the Euphrates, the lifeblood of a whole civilization. The garden is the center.

Then God places Adam in the garden to till it and keep it. That's the purpose of the human being. To keep the garden. To care for what is at the center that makes everything else possible.

We are to be the keepers of the garden. We are to tend to and care for the creation around us and as we do we will find life. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve will be tricked by the serpent and will disobey, just like in the Wind Cave story, but their disobedience will estrange them from the garden. Their actions will keep them from the garden. Sin has ecological consequences. We see this in the flood story too. Sin leads to the unleashing of floods upon the earth.

Biblical Scholar Ellen Davis says that in the scriptures God and Israel and creation are so interconnected with the people, that we should think about the Covenant not as a two way relationship between God and Israel, but as a three way relationship between God, Israel, and Creation. God can't be in relationship with Israel, with the people, without being in relationship with the creation too. The same is true for Israel. Israel can't be in relationship with God without being in relationship with creation too, in proper relationship with the garden.

We are to be garden keepers, it's how we find and sustain life, and it is how we stay in right relationship with God.

In this time of climate crisis, and sobering news, I'm always hungry for hope. I saw some this week. Millions of youth protesting in Northfield and throughout the world, calling for action on climate at the U.N. I also saw hope at a Cannon River Watershed Partnership field day just outside of Northfield, at a farm that borders Rice Creek which flows into the Cannon River just by the city compost site. Rice Creek is the only creek in Rice County that has brook trout. We went down to the creek, and we saw the trout. They are beautiful fish.

We heard from farmers who are experimenting with different practices like reducing the amount they till and planting cover crops along with their corn and beans. Both of these practices keep carbon in the soil and sequester additional carbon in the ground, they add to soil

health, reduce erosion, and allow more water to be absorbed by the soil. We saw research that showed how the use of cover crops around Rice Creek are lower the levels of nitrates going into creek, and we saw a soil demonstration that showed how these practices dramatically, dramatically lower erosion and allow more rain to be absorbed by the soil.

One farmer who was presenting about his experimentation with these practices said that every few years he receives a farm survey from the federal government. He has to fill out all of these questions about his farm, but at the end there's a question about religious affiliation: Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, others. He checked the box by Catholic, but he said, I wish there had been a box that said cover cropper. He felt like he was "getting religion." Because he was living in the garden in a new way. He was changing some practices and it was leading to cleaner water, healthier soil, he was responding to climate change, and he was making money too. Other farmers are asking him what he is doing too. Its hopeful.

We garden keepers, in big ways and small. Caring for one another. Caring for creation. That's where we find life. It is who we are called to be, and who we need to be. That's the story we tell. Amen.