

# To Till and to Keep

The First Sunday in Lent. Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19;  
Matthew 4:1-11.

If you've ever read the first few chapters of Genesis, you may have noticed that there appear to be two different creation stories. It's not that one is right and one is wrong. They are more like the different Spider Man films – the Tobey Maguire version and the Tom Holland version. They are different ways of presenting the same subject.

The first story, Genesis 1, is the day-by-day account. From a distance, God speaks creation into being and watches it all come together. The process takes six days, though the text never defines how long a day lasts. At the end of each day, God saw that it was good. Human beings, male and female together, were created in God's image on the last part of the sixth day. God told them to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" and "have dominion over . . . every living thing." However, we should note that God remained in charge, but delegated responsibility to the creatures made in God's image. With that final, human touch, creation was complete, and God saw that it was now *very* good. And God rested on the seventh day.

The second story of creation includes what we read today. The Lord God formed a body from the dust of the earth and the water of the rivers. The Lord God breathed into the body the breath of life and the body became a living being. Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden. The Lord God put the person there to take care of the garden – to till and to keep. The Hebrew words are better translated serve and protect. From the very beginning, the primary purpose of the human being, the reason for our existence, was to serve and protect the earth.

The human was given almost free reign, but there was a limit. Everything was fair game, except for the fruit of one tree – the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. We've often emphasized the moral character of the tree, and maybe that is what the story intended, but some writers suggest good and bad here are simply a way of saying everything – the good, the bad and everything in between. The fruit of this tree represented knowledge of everything. The human was warned to stay away from this particular tree.

In the verses we skipped, the Lord God realized it was not good for the human to be alone. So the Lord God decided to create a helper to be a partner to the human. For millennia, many have assumed that the helper was a lesser being than the human. But most of the times the word helper is used in the Old Testament, the helper is God. The helper was never imagined as someone beneath the human. And here in Genesis the word for helper is modified by another word which usually means "in the presence of" or "in sight of" or maybe "right in front of your face." The helper was to be a nearby powerful partner, given by the Lord God.

So the Lord God took more earth and created every kind of animal and brought them to the human for the human to name. The Lord God and the human worked together on this project, but both soon realized they were not on the right track. None of the animals were the kind of partner the human needed. The Lord God realized it was time to act alone. So the Lord God put the human to sleep. The Lord God then took a rib from the human and created life from life.

Incidentally, this is where Genesis introduces the words man and woman. Before this point, the human was simply called Adam. Adam is a creature made from the dirt, neither male nor female. Once the partner is

created, the text starts to refer to two kinds of creatures, ish and ishah, man and woman. But they both came from the one human Adam.

One day, the serpent approached the ishah. The serpent was not Satan. The serpent was just another creature in the garden, probably a creature with legs at this point. The serpent liked to push the edges, but clearly the woman and the man liked to push the edges as well. We often assume the ishah sneaked off to the tree all by herself, but the text is clear that the ish was right there with her. When the second human ate the forbidden fruit, the first human did not stop her and quickly followed. They were in this together.

And suddenly everything changed. The word sin is never used in the story. Neither is the word fall. But immediately everything was different. They knew things about themselves and about each other they had not known before.

Contrary to the Lord God's original warning, they did not die, at least not physically. But there was a death of something. A death of innocence? A death of the way things had been before? A death of not knowing and now they knew? They tried to fix what had changed, but it was like putting the toothpaste back in the tube. All their attempts were foolish. Ancient people knew that fig leaves, while large, were scratchy to the touch. It was the worst possible choice for clothing, especially for the kind of clothing they tried to make. The newly aware humans were not off to a good start. And from then on, everything became harder. Taking care of the earth became harder. Creating new life became harder. Being human became way more complicated. And it is still complicated today.

Just as there are two accounts of creation in Genesis, there are two primary ways this story of change has been interpreted. One way to read the story is that it is indeed a story of sin and fall, even though the words are not there. The humans disobeyed. They were kicked out the garden. They were appropriately punished. From that day on, humanity had to deal with the consequences.

But there is another way of reading the story that has been around for a long, long time. Since at least the third century but probably before, some have seen Genesis 3 not as the fall of humanity but the maturing of humanity. In eating the fruit of the tree, the ishah and the ish grew up. They lost their innocence but gained awareness, which is what happens in human life to this day. But though we get nostalgic at times for childhood, though we sometimes wish to be like we were before, given the choice, I doubt any of us would go back there. It is far better to be mature, despite the pain of growing up.

Either way you read it, whether this is the story of our disobedience or the story of our enlightenment, one point is clear. Human life has limits. There are limits to what we can take from creation. There are limits to what we can know or understand. There are limits to what we can safely consume. There are limits to our actions. The limits are not there to torment us. They are there for our own good.

And part of being obedient, or part of growing up, whichever way you look at it, is learning to live within the limits.

I see Jesus demonstrating the same obedience and maturity when the Devil approached him in the wilderness. The Devil's temptation was to push against the limits. The first was a temptation to an unlimited food supply. Jesus, turn these stones to bread. The next was a temptation to unlimited physical power. Jesus, throw yourself off this building. The third was a temptation to unlimited worldly power. Jesus, don't you want all of these kingdoms to be under your control.

All of the temptations have their plus side. Especially the third. There are times when I wish Jesus had taken the Devil up on the third one rather than leave the kingdoms of this world in the Devil's grip for now. But in every case, Jesus said, "No thanks. The scriptures say I don't need that. I'm good."

Humans who seek to follow the way of Jesus are called to live within limits. The practice of fasting or giving up something for Lent is about learning to live within limits, learning to say with Jesus, "The scriptures say I don't need that. I'm good." The goal is not just to prove that we can live without chocolate or alcohol or Facebook or whatever. The goal is to discipline ourselves to live within the proper limits of our humanity.

Throughout this season, our Creation Keepers team is inviting us to explore what it means to live within the limits of creation. We've been pushing the earth to the edge for a long time. The strain is starting to show. People with money and power can avoid some of the worst effects. But a lot of people can't. So caring for our neighbors also means tilling and keeping the earth, protecting and serving it now and in the future.

I trust this will be an inspiring and enlightening Lenten journey. And I trust we will discover what we already know – Life within limits is better. It is more joyful and grateful and natural. It is better for the earth, better for our neighbors, and better for us because it is how God made us to live. Amen.

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