

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

A few years back when we the strategic planning team was beginning its work, our first task was to identify the core values of Grace Lutheran Church. We identified five: faith, community, service, musical excellence, and intellectual integrity. What we had in mind with that last value, intellectual integrity, was our openness to questioning, science, and reason. Another way that that sometimes gets expressed in churches like ours is by saying that we are unwilling to check our brains at the door. At the top of the list in that regard is not taking the Bible literally, especially when it comes to the Bible's creation stories. Reading the first creation story with its six days of creation as if were journalism or history, as if the world actually came into being in six 24-hour days, is in obvious conflict with the scientific consensus that the universe is 13.7 billion years old and the earth as we know it took some 4 billion years to develop from the dust of previously exploded stars. But there is a complication that arises out of our desire to not deny science, and that is that our refusal to take the Bible literally when it contradicts science can also mean that we don't take the Bible *seriously* either. And that in turn can lead us to believe that we ultimately cannot take the Christian faith completely seriously. But the Christian faith is also one of our core values here at Grace, the first on the list, in fact, the one without which we cannot, of course, be the church. So the question then is this: is there a way to take seriously the Christian faith, and the Bible upon which it depends, even if we should not always take the Bible literally? And with regard to the creation stories of Genesis, if they do not tell us, literally, how the world came to be, or how we human beings came to be, then how can we regard them as the word of God, as our constitution says? Indeed, why should we pay any attention to them at all? This is an important question.

Here's how I answer it. The Bible is meant to address primarily the relationship of human beings and God, and then secondarily our relationship with one another and the world around us as a result of our relationship with God. But this important content, this core message, is embedded in the ancient understanding of the world. It had to be, to get the message across to ancient people. So, if we are to take the Bible seriously, as a vehicle for conveying to us God's word, God's message about God's relationship with us, then we have to let the Bible tell us its stories on its own terms, without imposing our culture and context on them. And with the help of those who study such things, we translate their cultural and contextual elements, so that we can hear the stories as they were meant to be heard. So let's try that with our first reading today.

Our first reading is the second half of the second creation story, which is different from the first one. This is not the six-day creation story. This is the garden story. In this story, God creates a human being from the earth before there is any other life. Then God plants a garden and puts the human being in it. Then God creates the animals, and then God takes a part of the human being and creates another one, and the two are distinguished by sex, a man and a woman. Then the story tells us it's point, or one of its points anyway: it is our common origin, the story says, which draws us humans together in relationship. We are meant to be together. The second half of the story begins with the famous episode of the serpent and the woman, with the man standing by and observing. The forbidden fruit is eaten and the humans are changed, now knowing good from evil. And this is where our reading takes things up.

I've already taken up too much time with background details here, so in typical fashion I'm going to now quickly focus on three elements of this story that work to make its point and

point us to the goal of the entire biblical narrative. If you want to dig deeper, come to the Hoffmeister Room after the service and we'll look at the text in more depth.

Okay, first, this story is about human nature, and how it is now out of alignment with God's original and ultimate intent for us. We are created naked, fully exposed, as it were, to God, to one another, and to the world around us. But now, after the serpent incident, we are uncomfortable with our nakedness, with our real selves, and so we cover it up. In the verse right before our reading begins, they sew fig leaves together to cover themselves, and now they hide in the trees when they hear God coming. They are now uncomfortable with who they are, so they pretend to be something else. They pretend to be trees! And then they pretend that they didn't do what they just did. "I didn't take the fruit," says the man, "the woman did it. She gave it to me. And by the way, God, you gave her to me. She was your idea not mine, so, you know it's kind of your fault. The woman likewise shifts the blame to the serpent, which again subtly shifts the blame back onto God.

The second thing this story tells us is that our reality is now a struggle. It is a struggle first with God's creation, which attacks us, and which we also attack and destroy. We are at odds with the world around us. Our reading cuts the story short, but the story goes on to talk about how things are now changed in our relationship with one another. We continue to be attracted to one another, drawn together in relationship and community, but now we dominate one another, and take advantage of one another for our selfish purposes. And we also dominate and take advantage of the creation, including the earth out of which we were formed.

Now, I understand if you were a little hesitant at the end of this reading as we have it to say "thanks be to God," because it ends abruptly, with seemingly nothing but bad news. But the whole story actually ends on a positive note. God does not give up on the humans, or on the creation. God exiles the humans from the garden, but gives them clothing to cope with their new reality. And that is the third point that this story is making. God too now needs to struggle with the world as it has become. But God does not give up on it. Indeed, the overarching biblical story that today's reading introduces is about God meeting us in the midst of our struggle, absorbing the consequences of our missteps and misalignment, and working to repair our relationship with God, one another, and the world. And that takes its ultimate and fullest form in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which is told in the context of these ancient creation stories that begin the Bible. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that when we are baptized, we are clothed with Christ, so that when God looks at us, God sees God's child. When the man and the woman clothed themselves in fig leaves, they wanted God to see them as trees so that God would not know them for who they really were. But putting on Christ in baptism is not like putting on ordinary clothing. And it is not like putting on a Halloween costume, pretending to be something we are not, while underneath we are our same old selves. When we put on Christ in baptism, we put on who we have become and are becoming by the grace of God, God's beloved children. And together as the church we present ourselves to the world as who we are becoming, the body of Christ, giving ourselves in love and service to a broken world.

We are able to do that because God first put on us, clothing God's very self in our human reality in Jesus Christ, taking on our nature and our lot in order to free us from the powers of sin, death, and evil and to restore the creation to its original goodness.

This is the trajectory of the biblical message, embedded in these ancient texts of the Bible. God continues to speak through these texts, to us and through us, for the life of the world. May we hear in them God's loving, creating, and redeeming voice. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.