

The Winds of God (2 of 3)

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(2 of 3)

Genesis 2:7-9

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2:15-23

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air and to every animal of the field, but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

*"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."*

This is not a creation story many of us like very much. For one thing, in contrast to the other creation story, the one that appears in Genesis 1, here the man is made first and then the woman out of his rib. The rib story has given rise to so much ribbing against women that it is no wonder many of us prefer the other story, where both are made at the same time. Then, as I

indicated yesterday, this is the story in which man (and indirectly woman also) is made out of dirt. We do not like to think of ourselves as dirt but rather as semi-angelic beings far above this material world. Therefore, since the story in Genesis 1 is more easily susceptible to such an interpretation, we tend to prefer that other story. And, thirdly, the story in Genesis 1 is more easily compatible with modern views of evolution in which creatures appear in an ascending order culminating in humankind.

Yet this story, too, is part of the biblical canon, and we cannot ignore it. Furthermore, whoever put together the book of Genesis was probably not stupid and knew full well that there were here two different stories. In placing them together back-to-back, in spite of their apparent contradictions, she or he must have had the intention that they be read together, that one serve to interpret and clarify the other, and vice versa. (And let me add in passing, by placing them together in spite of their obvious differences, he or she clearly indicated that neither of the two was to be taken literally. If you take the seven days and the ascending order of the first story literally, as a historical account of the order in which God created the world, the second story stands there to contradict you. And if you take the second story literally, the first stands there to contradict you. Both are equally the Word of God, and therefore neither should be interpreted in such a way as to deny the other.)

In any case, in spite of any difficulties we may have with this particular text—or rather, precisely because of the difficulties we have with it—, it may be helpful to look at it and at its parallel

story in Genesis 1 to see what they tell us about a subject that is of fundamental interest to this gathering, namely, the relationship between the human creature and the rest of creation.

Yesterday I mentioned the importance of recognizing that we are made of dirt, and that this is good. But there is more to that. There are lessons in this passage that have taken me an entire lifetime to learn.

It was many years ago. My father sat between my brother and me, as he read us the stories of St. Francis—how he spoke with "brother wolf," and how he praised "sister water" and even "sister death." Other people sought to kill the wolf and saw in water simply something to drink and in which to wash. But Francis saw himself as their brother and cared for them as his sisters and his brothers.

I loved those stories, but in my mind, they were part of fantasyland, as when our father also read to us from the tales of Jules Verne or from the Sunday comics.

Eventually I grew up, or I thought I did. St. Francis, Superman, and Captain Nemo became distant and cherished memories of an ideal world that never was. It was time to go on with the real business of living. Study. Get your degrees. Build a career. There is little time in real life for "sister eagle" or "brother fox."

Today as I think about these things, it is a long time since I saw an eagle flying free or a fox running across a field. I read in Genesis 2:7 that "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground," and I regret how much time I have spent--how much time this entire civilization has spent--trying to deny this earthy nature of ours. I even remember hearing sermons about how the human problem is that we have an earthy nature. But no, in the story of Genesis, being made out of the ground is part of God's good creation.

Then I keep reading, and I am suddenly struck by something I had never noticed before: "*out of the ground* the Lord God made to grow every tree . . . *out of the ground* the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air." The trees, the birds, and the animals are made "out of the ground," just as I am. What the narrator in Genesis is saying is not only that humankind is made out of the ground, and that this is good, but also that all other living things are made out of the ground, and that this too is good. We are all kindred, and that is good.

In several passages in the Gospels, Jesus speaks of the birds, the grass, and the lilies and then says that "your Father," who takes care of them, will also take care of us. I have traditionally understood that "your" referred to the disciples, or at most to humankind. But now I am not so sure. Is Jesus saying simply that a sparrow does not fall without the heavenly Parent of believers knowing it, and that we, as children of that Parent, should consider ourselves even more protected? Or is he saying rather that the sparrow is a child of the same Parent as we are, who takes care of both the sparrow and us? I think the latter.

Time has passed since those days when my father told me the stories of St. Francis. During that time, I have learned the importance of family. I have learned that I need family in order to live. But I have also learned that my family is greater than I originally thought—that my family includes many people to whom I am not directly related by blood. And now I am beginning to learn that my family, those from whom I draw support and without whom I cannot even conceive of myself, is even wider than people—that the family God has given me to love and to cherish and to find support in them includes all these trees, and rocks, and birds that I have treated so lightly.

St. Francis was right after all. Nature is our sister. Nature is part of us. We are part of nature. In destroying it, we destroy ourselves. In loving it, we love ourselves. That is the first lesson to be learned from these creation stories.

Then there is the question of our relation to nature and to each other. Some have correctly criticized the Christian tradition for teaching that “man”—both in the generic and in the gender-specific sense—was created to rule over nature, to do with it as we please, and that therefore much of the present ecological crisis and the coming ecological disaster is to be laid at Christianity's doorstep.

There is no doubt much truth to such an accusation. It is primarily the so-called "Christian" world that has approached nature as a vast reservoir from which to take whatever resources we

feel we need for our own comfort and in which to dump whatever waste results from our management and mismanagement. God said: "let them have dominion," and that is precisely what we have done.

Yet there is another way to interpret this text. In Genesis 1, we are indeed told that God said "let them have dominion," but that dominion is part of the image of God in human creation: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion..." In other words, human dominion over creation is to be exercised in imitation and in stewardship for a God whose dominion is one of love and grace. God's dominion is not for exploitation. Indeed, many of the ancient Near Eastern religions that surrounded Israel held that the gods had made humans so that they might be the servants and slaves of the gods. It was from some of those religious traditions that Israel borrowed much of the material in the first chapters of Genesis. But, in contrast to those other sources, there is here not even a hint of a God whose purpose in creating humankind is to have a whole race of slaves. On the contrary, God gives the human creature complete freedom to live in the garden and to eat of it—a freedom with boundaries (of the tree that is in the middle of the garden you shall not eat), but still complete freedom, even to disobey.

God rules the creation with love and grace. Likewise, this human creature made after God's image and likeness is to rule with love and grace. Dominion, yes; exploitation, no.

So far the first story. In Genesis 2, the relationship between the human creature and the rest of creation is presented in a slightly different way. God makes first the man, as we have already seen, out of dirt. And then comes an astonishing line. In the combination of the two creation stories as it now stands, every time that God completes something we are told that "God saw that it was good." Now, for the very first time, precisely after making what some would consider the crown of creation, man, the text declares that God said, "it is not good." "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner."

And so God sets out to make the rest of creation, not just as a background, nor even as food and physical resources, but as companions to the man. "So out of the ground [again, out of the same ground from which the man had been formed] God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name."

In order to understand the significance of all this, two points must be clarified. The first is, what is meant by "a helper as his partner"; the second, what is the significance of the act of naming.

The phrase that the NRSV translates as "a helper as his partner"; the old King James used to translate it as "a help meet for him." "Help" and "meet" were two different words, "a help ... meet," meaning "a help appropriate for him," or "a help fitting for him." Out of these two words, oral tradition created a single one, "helpmeet"—and we all know the meaning that has

been poured into that word. But that is not at all what the text means. Indeed, the word that is here translated as "help" or "helper" is often applied to God as the "help" of Israel. And what the KJ translates as "meet," and the NRSV as "partner," literally means "as in front of him," meaning something like a mirror image.

As to naming, it is well known that in ancient cultures the power to name was considered to be also the power to control. As in modern CB jargon, the name was a handle, and whoever has hold of the handle can control the rest.

That is why God brings the various items of creation before the man, "to see what he would call them." In naming them, the man claimed dominion over them. Not necessarily an evil dominion—remember what the first story says about the connection between God's image and human dominion over creation—but dominion nevertheless. The very act of naming shows that these creatures, though they will keep man company, and even though they are made of the same ground of which he is made, will not serve as his partner, as his mirror image. And so, the text says, "but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner."

It is then that the rib episode appears. Out of a rib of the man, God makes another creature and brings her to the man. And the man says: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." It is difficult to convey in English what the text actually says, for in English it appears that the man simply gives the

woman a name, just as presumably he had done earlier with the lion, the eagle, and the mouse. But that is not the case. The man does not give the woman a name but rather shares his with her. The name he seems to give her, wo-man, is not really a name different from his. It is his name in the feminine form. In Hebrew, he is Ish, and she will be Ishshah. Now finally someone has been found who is his equal, a helper and partner, a mirror image "as in front of him."

Then comes the story of the Fall. I shall not dwell on the details of that story but rather call your attention to the consequences of the Fall. Those consequences are several, but all point in the same direction: alienation, exploitation, and subjugation. Now there will be enmity between the woman and the serpent. Now the ground will be cursed because of the man, so that it will produce thorns and thistles, and the man will eat by the sweat of his face. That much is obvious. What is not so obvious, because we read the text from such an anthropocentric point of view, is that the man will be a curse upon the ground. Just as the woman will fear the serpent, and the serpent will fear the woman, so now will the man have to struggle with the ground in order to get his sustenance, and in that struggle both the man and the ground will lose. And there will also be a broken relationship between the man and the woman, for now, says God, "he will rule over you." The partnership that the man earlier proclaimed with such joy, "this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," will now be broken, and the relationship will be one of rule and domination. Significantly, the very next thing that the text in Genesis tells us, immediately after the curses resulting from the Fall, is "the man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living." Now the man, alienated from God, from the ground and from his wife,

decides that she is to be defined by a role, as mother of all the living, and gives her a name—or, in other words, puts a handle on her, so he can control her. Thus is the society of domination and of exploitation born, so that people no longer look at each other as true partners and companions but rather as things to be controlled and exploited.

Now, in spite of the many centuries that have passed since these stories were written, they seem to provide a fairly good description of the present situation. More and more, humanity relates to the rest of creation, and especially to the ground, as if it were an enemy from which we have to extract our sustenance, and thus the ground is cursed, and we are a curse upon the earth. And human beings, who were created to be partners to each other, strive for control over each other in economics, in politics, in church, and even in the home—and the result is unbearable violence upon each other and upon the whole of creation.

Unfortunately, this vision of dominance, alienation, and exploitation is so powerful that too often the church has lived by it and has even convinced itself that its task is to enforce the curse—to see that women and others remain subjected to "proper authority," that "property rights" of humans over the earth are respected and enhanced, that in the continuing struggle between human and human, and between humans and earth, "our side" remains on top.

But there is another vision. A vision of prophets. A vision of poets.

A vision of God:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.

For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Thus it would appear that there are two visions by which we might live. One is the vision of domination, and exploitation, and alienation. The other is the vision of peace, and justice, and equality, and partnership. But I say that it only appears that we can live by either of these two visions, for in reality, one is a vision of death, and the other is a vision of life. One is the vision that has led to the destruction of the environment and will certainly lead to our own destruction. The other is the vision that leads to life. All that remains is for us to choose. May the Spirit of God grant us the wisdom and the courage to choose wisely.