

“Rooted in Origin”

First Sermon in a Six-Week Series
Genesis 2:4b-25 (NRSV)

In his book *Where Main Street Meets the River*, Hodding Carter writes, “A wise woman once said to me, ‘There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings.’”

Inspired by Carter’s quote, an anonymous poet has written a verse to further explain this truth:

*“If I could give you just two things,
One would be Roots, the other,
Wings.”*

*Roots, not to tie you to the ground,
But to guide you to where your fulfillment is found
The nourishing start, the firm foundation,
The source of your inner determination.*

*Wings to soar over obstacles,
wings to fly free,
Wings to glide to the heights of the best you can be.*

*And when obstacles loom,
from your Roots grows a hand
Providing a strong, sturdy, safe place to land.*

*I’d choose these two things for the gifts that are best,
For with Roots and with Wings,
you’ll find all the rest!”*

You could say that what is true for our children, is also true for us as children of faith. To that end, our theme this fall is ROOTED. Over the next six weeks we’ll be exploring how we are ROOTED as followers of Jesus, as people who proclaim a faith that has deep roots which we often skim over. Our theme verse is printed just below my sermon title in your Order of Worship. It is Colossians 2:6-7: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”

Here's the thing: we've all been taught different things about the Bible and theology and faith and we're all at different places in our spiritual journey. We all read the Bible - the Scriptures of our tradition - through a different lens based on our experience, education, religious upbringing, perspective, personality, and even life stage. And I suspect that even as we've been taught different things, as we seek to follow Jesus we all want for our faith to be strengthened and we want to live with a bit more gratitude.

So this theme for us, ROOTED, is about exploring the roots of our faith together. Not so that we can all come to the same conclusions and believe the same things, but so that we can have a strong foundation that is deep enough and well-informed enough and gracious enough that as we grow our wings and fly off into the world, we will respect each other a bit more deeply and listen to each other a bit more intently. Because we recognize that we are rooted in something beyond ourselves and beyond the whims of whatever the passing culture of the day tells us is important. In

a globally connected world - to be rooted is kind of a counter-cultural value.

If you are like me, you may feel uprooted at times by the intensity of the world's problems and the pace of change. Everyday there are five new global issues to be concerned about and two new technologies to learn. Everyday there are new cultural and spiritual and identity understandings that are being embodied and expressed in ways that don't fit into the paradigms we learned as children and every day we are waking up wondering and questioning where our place in it all is...and what we are to think about it all...and what we are to do about it all to make a difference.

So through this series, we want to take a collective breath as a church community and get ROOTED in our faith and in this story (*point to the Bible*). Not in a sense that we want to be tied down to our past with nostalgia, rather, we want to be educated about our traditions and scriptures so that we are inspired to live into our future...inspired to take flight

with those wings - to love God and love others in the world in the way that is unique to us.

Scripture is a key way that we are ROOTED in our faith. It tells the story of our faith. And yet we so often read it in bits and pieces and don't necessarily understand the complete arc of the biblical narrative. How all the different books and characters fit together through time and space to tell the story of our God and God's people.

It's been said that "Stories are containers for truth. Neurology and the social sciences are now confirming what our best philosophers, storytellers and artists have always known to be true—as human beings, our brains are hardwired for story. Stories are the way we make sense of the world and understand our place in it. Stories define us and shape the way we live."¹

The philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre said, "*Before we can answer the question 'Who am I*

and what am I to do?' We must first answer the question, 'What story or stories am I a part of?'"²

The truth is, we all live (and die!) by the stories we tell ourselves and others. And there are so many stories that are clamoring to define us and shape the way we live. Stories in the larger culture that tell us what we have to be or do to be loved and accepted. Stories in our own family of origin that we carry with us well into adulthood. Stories in our heads that tend to define us and color the way we see God, ourselves and the world."³

"And when these stories are false, they can put us in bondage, get us stuck, and have a negative impact on the way we show up in life they can keep us from feeling rooted, because they choke out our true nourishment like weeds. In her book *Rising Strong*, Brené Brown says we all have stories that we're telling ourselves; and until we get honest and own them, they will continue to

¹ Brian Keepers, "God's Story, Our Story: The Story that Forms Us," *Fellowship Church* (Sept. 13, 2015), accessed on Sept. 8, 2019 at

<http://www.fellowshipreformed.org/sermons/2015/9/14/gods-story-our-story-the-story-that-forms-us>.

² Keeper, *ibid.*

³ Keeper, *ibid.*

define us. When we let the false stories define us, it prevents us from living into *another* story, a *better* and *truer* story. A story that leads to life, healing, freedom and joy. What story is that? It's the story that the Bible tells us about who God is and who we are."⁴

"Yes, the Bible is ultimately a story about God; but it is also *our* story. God puts *us* in the story. We see ourselves in the quirky, beautiful and broken cast of characters we meet in the Bible. And we also find our truest selves—what it means to be fully human and fully alive—in this biblical story."⁵

So today we root ourselves in this story anew. We begin a journey of learning how to get into God's Story; and also how to get God's Story into us."⁶ We are going to spend this year in something called the Narrative Lectionary, which takes us through the sweeping biblical narrative, beginning with Creation and up through the early church.

The Narrative Lectionary includes the major episodes in Scripture arranged in a narrative sequence to help us see Scripture as a story that has coherence and dynamic movement:

- From September to mid-December the preaching texts begin with the early chapters of Genesis, move through the stories of Israel's early history, the exodus, the kings, prophets, exile, and return.
- From Christmas to Easter there is sustained reading of Jesus' life and ministry from one of the four gospels
- From Easter to Pentecost the texts are chosen from Acts and Paul's letters, and we learn about life in the early church, how people first struggled to live this story out in community.

So let's dive in beginning with one of our creation stories from Genesis 2. The theme is "ROOTED in Origin."

Lutheran pastor Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us, "*God is both our origin and our destination.*" It is a reminder

⁴ Keeper, *ibid.*

⁵ Keeper, *ibid.*

⁶ Keeper, *ibid.*

that we have all come from God and we are all going to God. Which means, God is part of the journey all along the way.

There is a lot of interest these days from websites like 23andme and ancestry.com to find out our genetic origins and to link ourselves to our ancestors as far back as we can. Which is all fascinating stuff. But understanding our ancestry, as interesting as it is, is not as powerful as understanding our story of origin...that thing which becomes the driving factor for how we live and move and have our being in the world. And while we can't choose our ancestry or life circumstances, we can choose how we frame and tell our story or origin.

Origin stories are common in mythology and also in the comicbook/super hero world. They help explain why a superhero has come to have his or her superpowers and what their driving motivation is. For example:

Spider-Man: Bullied teenager Peter Parker was bitten by a radioactive spider at a science exhibit. Discovering he had unique abilities like super-strength and the ability to stick to walls, he built himself a pair of web-shooters and decided to become Spider-Man so he could achieve fame and profit. Unfortunately, after purposefully deciding not to stop a fleeing thief, he comes home hours later to discover that the same criminal had murdered his Uncle Ben. Stricken with grief by his father figure's death, he took to heart the advice "With great power comes great responsibility," and decided to use his powers to protect the innocent.⁷

A story of origin helps define our identity and it gives us purpose. And Genesis 1 and 2 do that for us as well.

There are two creation stories in the early chapters of Genesis. These two stories come from two different authors, who were each addressing different situations in the lives of their people, in different contexts.

⁷ Adam Holmes, "10 Classic Superheroes, Ranked By Their Origin Stories," *CinemaBlend*, accessed on Sept. 8, 2019 at <https://www.cinemablend.com/new/10->

[Classic-Superheroes-Ranked-By-Their-Origin-Stories-71173.html](https://www.cinemablend.com/new/10-Classic-Superheroes-Ranked-By-Their-Origin-Stories-71173.html).

Genesis 1:1-2:3, though first in canonical order, is actually from the exilic period in Babylon (when the Israelites were in captivity) and depicts creation as God's bringing order out of a watery chaos, which would have been familiar to the Israelites living in Mesopotamia, the land "between the rivers" that flooded every year. As exiles, their lives were chaos and they craved order. And here, the human couple comes at the end of the created order.⁸

Genesis 2:4-25 comes from the earlier time of the Davidic dynasty and appeared while Israel was a sovereign state. Israel is in power and has wealth and so it makes sense that this story depicts "Man" as in charge, created first, and responsible for the care of the creation, which is portrayed as the result of the Lord God bringing together four rivers to form an oasis of sorts where there had only been dry ground before.⁹ Man is more of a co-creator in this second story.

If the first creation story flies above at 30,000 feet, the second creation story zooms in on its context to see the details not only of *what* God creates but *how* God creates.

In Genesis 1, the "first creation story," you have God calling out things. But in Genesis 2 it's "*ha adam*" (the man) who names things. God turns over the job of naming to the man. The continuation of God's creative work, in some sense, is given to the man. And in some ways, it's a creation of knowledge and creativity and agency that is given to man.

For all that God calls "good" in Genesis 1, in Genesis 2 we learn that it is *not* good that the man should be alone - God says. So then you have the search for an *ezer*, translated "helper" but that translation may incorrectly connote dependence or subordination to some. But that's not what the word means. The being that is called *ezer* most in the Old Testament is God...and surely God is not subordinate to the

⁸ Mark Throntveit, "Commentary on Genesis 2:4b-25," *Working Preacher* (Sept. 8, 2019), accessed on Sept. 8, 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4130.

⁹ Throntveit, *ibid*.

creation. We read all over the psalms that God is our *ezer*/ “helper.” So what the man is really looking for is an equal, someone to be a partner, a helper - as God is. I love how one scholar put it: the woman, then, is intended to be a physical re-presentation of God to the man.¹⁰ (Personally, I love that!)

In this symbolic narrative, a part of the man’s body is taken and the woman is made. And then the man says “this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” which is a Hebrew idiom that essentially means “*This* is it! This is the real deal. And we can understand in the context of when this was written the importance of emphasizing the man/woman relationship for procreation and the ongoing survival of the species. More more deeply, the truth is this: in each other, we find the connection to God...because each other person we run into is created in the image of God.¹¹

¹⁰ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker, “#371: Garden of Eden,” *I Love to Tell the Story Podcast* (Aug. 31, 2019), accessed on Sept. 8, 2019 at

We learn that in Genesis 1 human beings are created in the image of God. If we combine that with the anthropology of Genesis 2 we have God forming *adam* from the *adamah*...the dust of the earth then we learn that are **both/and**...both made in the image of God **and** made from the dust of the ground. Which implies a relationship both ways - with God and with the rest of creation.

We see that the first thing God gives is the gift of life itself, but then God gives ‘vocation’ in verse 15 - the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it...to *avad* and to *shamar* (as the Hebrew says)...to serve and to guard. We’re given life as gift and we’re giving the vocation of caring for creation. We are to serve and to guard creation. That is our job. The corporate vocation of humanity is to serve and to care for the earth...and for one another.

So what do we learn in Genesis 2? Well, we learn our real Story of Origin. Which is:

https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1173.

¹¹ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

- 1) We are created both from the dust of the earth and in the divine image of God - each one of us.
- 2) We are co-creators/co-namers with God in deciding what is best for us.
- 3) We are created to be in relationship and community with one another; we are not meant to be alone.
- 4) Our purpose is to serve and guard the earth and all of creation.

This is our story of origin and it's a story that has a vision of *shalom*—which is about all of creation flourishing, enjoying harmony, and being made whole. This is a picture of humanity and the whole world the way God designed it to be.¹²

You see, the first way we are ROOTED in the narrative of our faith is to understand our origin story and to begin telling it to ourselves as if it were true and we believed it was ours.

Is this the story you've been telling about your origin? Or - have you been telling yourself you are inherently flawed or not good enough or smart enough

or good-looking enough or knowledgeable enough or “(fill in the blank) enough.” Have you been telling yourself you lack purpose or direction in life or that everything seems futile? If this is you - then maybe look to Genesis 2 as a story of origin that you can root yourself in first, before you tell any other story about yourself. This is our collective origin story as Christians, and this story is to form our deepest roots and from here and only from here, do we then individualize it and take off with our wings flying in whatever direction we are called. Where we fly will be different for all of us, but our roots should look the same.

Most importantly, this is a story of origin for ALL of us and if we every forget this, two things can help us remember.

First the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree we are not supposed to eat from. What do you think that Tree means? What does it represent? Well, I'll let you decide for yourself, but here's one thought to consider.

¹² Keeper, *ibid.*

I think this Tree is put into our Story of Origin for a reason. The author had seen what had happened when we tried to play god with one another, instead of living as companions with one another and as stewards of this earth alongside one another. What does it mean to NOT fall to the temptation of eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? I wonder if it has something to do with how we classify things and people as “good or evil” or as “who’s in and who’s out” or “who’s right and who’s wrong.” Is that our knowledge to decide? Who or what is good? Since we tend to think people us are good and that people not like us are maybe not evil but at least ‘not as good as us’ then perhaps such knowledge is false and will lead us astray. Maybe this is a message to stop categorizing and deciding what or who is Good and what or who is Evil.

Second, this biblical passage specifies the exact geographical location and physical boundaries of the garden known as Eden by providing

the names of four rivers drawn from antiquity: Pishon (the Blue Nile), Gihon (the White Nile), Hiddekel (The Tigris), and the Euphrates. The description of Eden, the birthplace of humanity, is identified as the expanse of land from the location of modern-day Iraq outlined by the Tigris and Euphrates and extending in through the region presently regarded as the Middle East and into the Nile Valley region of Northeast Africa from Egypt and Sudan downward to Ethiopia and Uganda in sub-Saharan Africa.¹³

Ultimately this passage—so often overlooked in discussions and debates about the origins of the human race—clearly articulates Africa and the Middle East as the center of the biblical world.

This too, is important for our story of origin. We are rooted in a faith that is geographically not rooted here where we live in the United States, but rather halfway across the world. To plant our roots deeply into that

¹³ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, “Lecture - Genesis 2:10-14,” *The African American Lectionary* (Feb. 7, 2010), accessed on Sept. 8, 2019 at

<http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=131>.

soil is to ask ourselves from where we have first come and why then, do we cling so tightly to the soil on which we live now? For that is not the soil which defines us. God's creation is not divided into countries, it is only boundaried by love, a love that encircles all. You may have heard it say that the America is God's country. Well, not according to this story of origin. According to this story, *our* story, in Genesis 2, God's country is certainly not us here in the U.S.

How does the physical location of the Garden of Eden call us to respond to people who we have named as "other" or "enemy" or "immigrant?" How do the very people we often exclude, show us a clear and unique image of God? What do they teach us about our origin?

The most profound good news of Genesis 1-2 is that we ALL claim the same story of origin:

- 1) We are created both from the dust of the earth and in the divine image of God - each one of us.
- 2) We are beloved co-creators/co-namers with God in deciding what is best for us.

- 3) We are created to be in relationship and community with one another; we are not meant to be alone.
- 4) Our purpose is to serve and guard the earth and all of creation...to be stewards of the earth, both collectively and individually.

To be rooted is to "get back to our roots" in a grounding a freeing way...reminding us from whence we came so that we can discern where we are to go.

Amen.