

NOT ALONE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on World Communion Day, October 7, 2018

Lectionary Reading: Genesis 2: 18-24.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Bought 19 Years Ago and Never

Used, I Wore a Flashy Robe, and Bobbled Up the Bride's Wedding

You have never before seen the robe that I'm wearing today. A little insight into my personality is that I'm pretty much a fuddy-duddy at heart. It was bought 19 years ago and has never been worn. I have not had the nerve to put the thing on for a worship service but thought that, with World Communion Sunday today, let's give the mantle a try. It was purchased at the Parliament of World Religions that I attended in 1999 in Cape Town, South Africa.

The scripture that Arlene Price read is marvelous, but it always brings up a moment of terror for me. I was performing a wedding, co-officiating with a female Episcopal priest, and we had decided ahead of time that we would divvy up the service, so I had the introduction. My Little Book of Common Prayer was being used and it says in it that a the groom shall leave his father and

mother and shall cleave unto his wife. The same passage is also mentioned in the New Testament.

The wedding service had started, with everybody gathered around, and I very loudly and boldly proclaimed in the introduction that a man shall leave his wife and shall cleave unto his . . . and I'm standing there. I don't care how verbally skilled you are, there's no way out of that one. The bride is looking at me as though she were thinking, "You're ruining my day." I'm frozen and don't have a single thing to say as I thought, "A man shall leave his wife on their wedding day," and who knows who he's going to cleave to.

Stunned and silent. Then the Episcopal priest at my side finally said gently, "Perhaps we should start over." I turned to her and worded weakly, "That's a fine idea." And we did. The bride probably never forgave me.

Jewish and Christian Readings

Coincide on the Same Weekend for Two of the Genesis Creation Stories

Many Christian churches use the lectionary cycle, and today's passage happens to coincide with another cycle, and that is for the Jews, who had a Torah reading on the same subject in Genesis. Typically, it is five chapters or so of the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures for the year. Our Christian reading for this week is also the Torah reading for this same week for the Jews. Looking at Genesis, Arlene had just read a portion of Genesis 2, and there is also Genesis 1, so this is a pair of creation stories.

The first one, Genesis 1, comes from what's called the Priestly tradition. There are four different traditions that managed to be on their own for a while, but throughout the ancient history of the Jewish people, the Jewish religion, the four traditions got together into the form that we now have, called the Torah or the Pentateuch. Genesis 1 comes from the Priestly tradition.

One notable difference remains: In Genesis 1, wherever one reads the word "God," the Priestly tradition behind it is the name "Elohim," actually plural for gods in Hebrew. Then Genesis 2 is from the Yahweh tradition, and it's always "the LORD God." "The LORD" is all capitals, which is a hint to them that behind it is the name "Yahweh."

Lesson # 1, Humanity in the Image

and Likeness of God; Lesson # 2, God Is Spirit and so Is Humanity

I'd like to look at two verses, one in Genesis 1 and one in Genesis 2. In Genesis 1, verse 26, the verse is about humanity being made in the image and likeness of God. (That's found in the Statement of Oneness that we recite every Sunday.) And so it talks about *the* human being. One thing I need to be clear about is that, when the text refers to "Adam," yes, it's a boy's name. However, ha Adam in Hebrew — ha being the article like "the" human being — so it's not just a boy, it's the whole of humanity, it's *the* human being. And then in the next sentence (verse 27) it says Ish for male and Ishah for female:

- ✓ "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness"
- ✓ "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."
- **Lesson No. 1.** In Genesis 1: 26, the statement that humanity is made in the image and likeness of God takes place *before* there is any division whatsoever between the elements of humanity. Between

male and female, rich and poor, black and white, straight and gay, Republican and Democrat — before these separations, there is no distinction whatsoever.

This is a core lesson. It might sound simple to you, but you will forget this lesson before you leave the parking lot. I guarantee it.

All humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. When you look at someone whom you discount or someone whom you despise or someone whom you don't trust, think about your reaction. Looking at any Down's syndrome person, every single one of us ought to remember that we all were made in the image and likeness of God *before* any distinctions were made.

- **Lesson No. 2.** Considering that same verse, we know from countless places, throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament, that God is Spirit. In some places, it's explicit, and in other places, it's implicit. But in dozens and perhaps hundreds of places, God is Spirit, which means that the image is spiritual, not physical. It is our spirit, it is our

souls that look like God's personhood.

Therefore, to be Godly, to be Christ-like means that you must attend to your soul, not your body. Again, I guarantee that you will forget that simple lesson. You will look at someone, and his or her primary identity in your mind will be what they look like — body, not soul.

In Addition to Lessons 1 and 2,

Your Essence Is not Your Body; It Is Your Soul and Is Forever

Two lessons from that one verse in Genesis 1, and then let's move over to Genesis 2. Now this is quite a story, with crystal-clear symbolism. You have the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You have the snake, lying up there on a branch whispering to Eve. You have the river flowing out of the Garden of Eden, watering the whole of earth, once again a beautiful archetypal kind of image. And once again you have ha Adam, the human being formed from earth, who is a soul having become physical, having incarnated, so to speak. But then in verse 18, it says:

- ✓ “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I

will make
him a helper as his partner.’”

Then we enter into a marvelous but sort of silly adjunct. It's like we've got the omniscient God of the universe, who starts bringing different kinds of animals to this person. Really! It's like a rat or a rhinoceros or a snake or any other kind of unwanted creature. I'm imagining Hebrew scholars of old sitting around, and maybe they were up a bit too late the night before, but they talk about God bringing about scroungy animals, none of them good enough for the dress parade. Finally a rib is taken from the side of a sleepy upstart, unaware of his forthcoming fate, and we have a marvelous phrase:

- ✓ “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.”

Because of the Torah cycle and the lectionary cycle coinciding on this same scripture last week, I ended up reading what rabbis said about the passage, not what the Christian pastors said. I was amazed. For the rabbinical crew it was plain as day that we're not talking about a rib. We're not taking the passage literally, that the rib is symbolic of your side, but you've got an androgynous human and it is split. This side goes this way, and that side goes that way. Out of the androgynous part of Adam, male and female were formed, such that we would never be alone. That was the rabbinical take on this passage.

However, there are some bread-and butter lessons here. There are some fundamental, primal lessons here. Let me recap:

- ✓ Lesson No. 1: All humanity is made in the image of God! If you want a spiritual lesson on it, apply it to those whom you don't like. Apply it to the ones who irritate you. Yet all humanity lies in the image of God.
- ✓ Lesson No. 2: Our primary essence is spirit, not our bodies! Spirit is what we really are; a body is what we have temporarily.
- ✓ Lesson No. 3: We are not alone! It is not good that we are alone. Let me expand on that a little more. There's a marvelous passage in Mark 12: verses 24-27. (Don't worry about the context; the context was sort of weird anyway.)
 - “Jesus said to them, ‘Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.’And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush,

how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.”

Jesus is having this argument with the scribes and the Pharisees. But his emphasis is to them, in that context that their ancestors were not dead. They are still alive and primarily because their essence is spirit, not their body, not flesh. And then we have Jesus saying the very last line of the gospel of Matthew:

- ✓ “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

And then we have Psalm 139, which in about a dozen different ways says that God is with us no matter what:

- “O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

- Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,’
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

So far in this sermon, I have not said one single thing that you didn’t already know. However, we chronically forget all three of these basic lessons. We forget them a half dozen times a day, or perhaps a dozen times a day:

- † All of humanity is made in the image of God.
- † Your essence is *not* your body. Your essence is your soul. You just happen to have a body.

† In a few minutes, we will be celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's supper on this World Communion Sunday. It is a ritual that reminds us we are connected. It's why they call it communion. We are connected to God, to Christ, to Spirit, to ancestors, and to one another.

Amen.