

## TOP TEN STORIES & THEMES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: Week 1 -- Creation: "In the beginning, God..."

Most everyone I know has heard, received or passed along some "beginnings" stories. Stories surrounding our birth, our baptism and our childhood, and stories passed along from our parents, grandparents and other ancestors and relatives are more than just "good stories." They also help shape us and form our identity. These stories can shape character and provide purpose, getting us in touch with who we are and why we exist. In groups, organizations and nations we also have "beginnings" stories that serve some of the same purposes. First Lutheran celebrated its 100th Anniversary in 2007 which included many stories of our beginnings as a congregation. Lutherans pass along stories of our beginnings with Martin Luther and the Reformation -- foundational moments like Luther's "Here I Stand" speech during his trial. Americans pass along stories and legends like Ben Franklin's kite and George Washington's cherry tree. Here are some thoughts, scripture readings, and questions for your journey "back to our beginnings" for the rest of this week.

The Creation Stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 -- and some would include a third version of creation, recorded in The Psalms (Psalm 104 in its entirety, along with Psalm 19:1-6, Psalm 29:3-10, and Psalm 139:13-18, especially) -- give clues and guidance for all people who are part of the Abrahamic Faiths (Jews, Christians and Muslims). These are our "Beginnings Stories" that shape our character, provide identity and give insight into who we are and why we exist. They speak to us of God's intentions for us and for the world, and inform our living in relationship with God, God's creation and all of God's children.

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### ROLES & RELATIONSHIPS: MEN & WOMEN

#### Genesis 1:26-27

When the creation story in Genesis 1 talks about the first man and first woman, note how they are described. Verse 27 is written as a Hebrew literary tool known as Parallelism. One phrase is said three different ways in order to call attention and make an important point. What is that point? That male and female are both created "in God's image." Man is not made in God's image, then woman as something less. Male and Female are both created "in the image of God". Men and Women are different, but they are equals. That also infers that to understand God, we need to consider the characteristics and attributes of both male and female. One example of making this metaphor more practical is to say, "God is like a Providing Father, and God is like a Nurturing Mother." Images of both feminine and masculine expressions of God are scattered throughout the old and new testaments.

+ How have you experienced God in your life? In what ways have you experienced both the male and female characteristics or qualities of God? Who, in your life, has been the person or persons through whom you have seen and experienced God most closely and most meaningfully?

+ Where and how do we see evidence -- even within religion -- of a contrary message to the Bible's creation stories... that men are created in the image of God, and that women are something else, something less? What are some simple ways we can be a part of helping the world see the Creation story as a better story for the roles and relationship of men and women?

#### Genesis 2:18-25

When the creation story in Genesis 2 (attributed to a different author/editor than the Genesis 1 account) talks about the first woman and the first man, note how they are described. (Familiarity with the Hebrew language greatly helps, because the English translations don't really do the biblical language justice.) Verse 18 and verse 20 refer to the woman as "a helper as partner" for the man. The original King James translation uses the term "helpmate" for this phrase. This English translation has been used in some religious circles to "prove" that men are "in charge" and women are somehow less, subservient, subject to men. This is simply a matter of poor translation. The Hebrew word in verse 18 and verse 20 is EZER, which refers to woman as man's "EZER," which means "helper." The only other use for this word in the entire Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is in reference to GOD as Israel's EZER (Helper). So, if anything, using the word Ezer, and properly translating the Hebrew word, would elevate Woman above Man in terms of rank or importance or power. (The NRSV translation, "Helper as Partner" is very helpful here, because no "status" other than "equals" is meant by this phrase, really. AND, it means that both need each other. There is an inferred interdependence of mutual relationship. Co-existence depends on both being equal participants. Symbiosis is a good word in Science that works well here. For one good example of the Hebrew word EZER being used to refer to God, see the story in 1 Samuel 7:7-14. God is Israel's EZER (helper).

+ How do the roles of man and woman as equal partners in creation help us better understand the roles of Humanity and God as (equal) partners in the world? What questions or concerns or ah-hah's does that notion generate for us?

Only later, in Genesis 3, do we hear the story of humanity choosing to go in a direction contrary to God's intention. Basically, we humans decide we don't need God's participation and guidance, but that we can go it alone, on our own. When that happens, relationships suffer. Only as a result of the fall do woman and man fall out of harmony and enter into relationships of inequality. And the same happens between humanity and animals (Genesis 3) within families and among siblings (Genesis 4), and among different ethnic groups (Genesis 10-11).

These relationships of disharmony are addressed throughout history -- God always forgiving, reconciling, and pointing the way to restored harmony as intended in our "beginnings." For two good stories of Jesus and St. Paul addressing these disharmonies, see Matthew 19:3-6 (Jesus shows his Jewish colleagues how the marriage is intended to be lived according to the equal partnership model of Genesis 1 and 2), and Galatians 3:26-29 (Paul explains that because of Jesus, we are not restored to the God-intended relationships of harmony and equality between men and women, between ethnic and religious differences, and between wealthy and poor.)

+ Where do we see evidence of ethnic, racial, social and economic disparity and disharmony? What can we do to help restore harmony and equality for our neighborhood, community and world?

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#### GOD STOPPED CREATING, BUT NOT REALLY...

The Genesis stories tell us that God's Creation is "good." (note: not perfect, but good) God is the owner, and God never gives up ownership. But God entrusts what God owns to humanity. God entrusts the Good Creation into the hands and minds and hearts of God's created stewards -- humanity. The church word we use here is STEWARDSHIP. We are stewards of God's Creation. This term, found in the new testament, literally means "managers of the household." We are caretakers and managers of God's world. And while God stopped making more creation at the end of the Genesis 1 story, it is clear that God's creative work continues every day. How? Through US! God's Stewards. God inhabits God's creation -- including God's stewards, humanity -- so that God now continues to create, care for, produce, renew, heal, sustain, nourish and grow Creation on an ongoing basis. We are Co-Creators, with God, as God's unfinished work continues to move forward. Each day is another day of the creation process described as beginning in the stories of Genesis 1 and 2. Now we see how powerful and wonderful the new ELCA slogan is: God's Work, Our Hands. Jesus showed us how to use this amazing creative power of God to bless the world.

+ How does considering ourselves as God's Co-Creators empower us? How does it frighten us? What are some ways we can see humanity using that power destructively? What are ways we see humanity using that power positively?

+ What are things you and I can do every day to use our God-given power to keep God's creation "good"? How can we encourage others to do the same?

+ Do we see that caring for the environment is really a spiritual matter? A faith matter?

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#### RELIGION & SCIENCE; THE BIBLE AND THEORIES LIKE "BIG BANG" AND "EVOLUTION"

Like the first chapter in a good novel, the Bible's Creation stories introduce us to the key characters and plot. As such, the opening chapters of Genesis should be read more like a novel than scientific theory or historical fact. This account was the best story in ancient times for the ancient Hebrew people about the world's origin. It has many common traits and themes with other creation stories among other ancient peoples. The writers were less concerned about the "how" of creation than "who" created it. No matter "how" the world came to be, the writer would ascribe God to be the actor bringing order out of chaos and giving life. While not science, it is a statement of faith. So we profess in our creeds that God is Creator, and that we find God behind as well as within the ongoing process of creation. As St. Paul says, this Creator God we see and know in Jesus is the One "in whom we live and move and have our being." (See Acts 17:22-28) Science addresses the "how" and the "when" of our beginnings. Religion has always been about the "who" and "why" of our beginnings. The two do not have to be in conflict. Both Science and Religion are gifts of God's "good" creation. They can both be used for blessing or harm. Darwin and Galileo -- two scientists who suffered persecution by the church because their theories were perceived as being contrary to the Bible -- were both faithful Christians. For a good understanding of how Science and Religion live together in harmony, and for a good explanation of where the "myth" of Science being against Religion came from -- especially in the "Creationism v. Evolution" debate -- we recommend the book, "ROCKS OF AGES," by Stephen Jay Gould. Gould sees both as necessary practices for the good of humankind, with religion serving to hold the practice of science accountable to ethical values that serve humanity well. Yes, there are scientists who claim that their realm of knowledge eliminates religion and belief in God. But those are a minority, and they see religion as something very different from what religion actually is. And, yes, there are religious people who claim that their religion invalidates the need for and use of science. But they are a minority, and they see science and religion very differently than the generally accepted uses and benefits of science for the majority of humankind.

+ How has science helped us gain a deeper appreciation for God and God's world? How can science help us be faithful Co-Creators with God for the sake of God's creation?

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#### IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS... ALWAYS HAS BEEN, ALWAYS WILL BE

What does this story tell us about the lead actor in this collection of stories we call the Bible? What can we learn about the qualities, characteristics and motivating factors? What's one of the first things we notice in the Creation story? Who initiates

the action? God! God steps into the darkness and creates out of love and a desire for companionship; that's hugely important. Unlike ancient gods, God isn't malevolent but benevolent; God isn't out to get us, but God is out to give! Like loving parents who conceive and birth a child, God longs to watch us grow, discover, and experience the abundance of life. God wants to be our companion in life. Just as parents do not know how a child will develop, so God knows there are no guarantees about the choices we'll make. God is willing to roll the dice and risk rejection and betrayal, hurt and heartache for the chance of love. God longs to witness our gratitude and experience our friendship. Life is a gift to be enjoyed in relationship with God, each other and the creation.

+ In the words of Dr. Phil, "How's that working for you?"