

20th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.6.24

Genesis 2:18-24

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the human should be alone; I will make another, a helper and 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 human to see what he would call them; and whatever the human called each living creature, that was its name. The human gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the human there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the human, 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 human 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.' Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.' (419)

The faith of my childhood can be summed up thus: God loved me. In my experience, there was something particular about God's love for me, and it was related to something particular about me, something maybe even loveable about me.

But this wasn't exclusive. I never sensed God loved me more than God loved others, my sister, for example, or my neighbors or friends at school. This secret love I experienced wasn't as opposed to God's less-than-love for anyone else. This secret love was a secret everyone had, in their own way: this secret closet of our souls, as the anonymous writer of the medieval spiritual classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing* put it. We all have such a closet, safe, familiar, where God meets us to love us, to affirm that love, in the silence that ushers you into sleep at night, in the gloaming of morning that carries you back into the waking day, God's love for each as tremendous and tender as God's love for any, God's love for me, God's love for you, besotted really.

There's all manner of trouble to be found in the Book of Job. We begin this week a several-weeks long journey with this troubling book. We'll have plenty of time to get to it, the many

aspects of all this trouble. As for now, a righteous man feared God, which is to say he stood in awe and acted in obedience to the Lord God who created all things. And God loved him, trusted him, this man whose name was Job. God, meeting with his council one day, spoke of Job to Satan, the one whose name means “adversary” or even “accuser,” the one among God’s council whose task it was to test what God might otherwise besottedly embrace.

Someone’s got to do it. Someone’s got to toe the line.

This is one of the troubling things in the book: that God ever conspired with Satan, ever valued him as one among his advisers.

Of course, Satan would fall from such a trusted position. He would come, especially with Christianity, to be understood as entirely adversarial, entirely *accusatory*, the sort that finds someone else to blame in order never to have to answer for his own actions. He would show up in the wilderness to tempt Jesus, testing him as to whether he truly could serve as the Christ. He would show up later on throughout the story, always looking for an opportune time, as the Gospel of Luke characterizes him. He was wholly destructive, just as the spirit of accusation can actually be. Things can grow thin and brittle, can come unraveled, when a spirit of accusation comes to dominate. True, this is a very effective way to generate a community, to find someone to accuse and get everyone to join in. But I think it’s this “sinful generation” that Jesus meant often to call out so to correct.

Yet early in Judeo-Christian history, when absolute monotheism came to the neighborhood, all the spirit world was to be taken in faith as under God, including accusation and adversarial posturing. These were wrestled into God’s agenda and mode, God who is the creator of all things, God among who there is no rival. (Monotheism has its theological challenges—like, if all comes from God, then whence comes evil, whence comes suffering? Indeed, monotheism might be the very idea that made the Book of Job so important, and so troublesome.)

But that the satanic, the accusatory and the acrimonious and the suggesting of things in bad faith (just asking questions) might somehow be to godly purpose has always struck me as off the mark, one of the things Christianity, with its more complicated understanding of monotheism, eased up on—that there are things of the spirit-world that are radically against God, that don’t need to be ascribed to God.

But I’ve taken that too far, I realize now. Whenever I encounter anything that feels adversarial, I’m wary—which isn’t always warranted.

Because to be adversarial can be a good thing, can be put to God's purpose. It can be crucial in the pursuit of excellence. You sharpen your ideas when someone questions them, which is one reason why our society's recent sorting into ideological silos doesn't do anyone's thinking any favors, one reason why "safe spaces" can make a college classroom degraded of its purposes. Not for nothing many advocates of higher education bemoan the notion that the classroom should be a "safe space." Not for nothing the press is to be adversarial when it comes to the government, and that the White House Press Dinner is most questionable when things are too cozy. You fine-tune your goodness when someone points out where you've been cruel. You increase the odds of success when someone points out all the challenges you'll face, all the reasons why success isn't likely or at least isn't inevitable.

When at Church on the Hill we embarked on a re-envisioning as regards the meeting house, someone counseled, "Hire a consultant to conduct a feasibility study." I really didn't want to. I really didn't believe it necessary, or even a wise use of funds, as these studies are expensive. I didn't want to hear about it possibly not being feasible.

That was then.

Now a committee is gathering to re-envision the Monterey meeting house, and I find myself thinking of good old Satan and encouraging a feasibility study. Find where the adversarial conditions are, and steer into them. It will help you find your mission. It will help chart your way.

As for why *God* might need someone to serve as an adversary, I wonder if God might have otherwise been a bit of an old fool when it came to his creatures. Loving to a fault.

Our next book for the Book Club is *Reading Genesis*, by Marilynne Robinson. It's an elegant book, carefully wrought. Robinson, as many admiring critics have pointed out, brings a novelistic eye to the reading of scripture, which is to say she fills out the narrative where scripture leaves us with but few details to go on. It's also to say she brings a humanistic spirit to it all, regarding the human as worthy of regard, worthy of serious engagement, if not also wonder and awe. What is the human, indeed, that she is mindful of us?

But mindful she is, and it's a cue she takes from the God she meets in Genesis.

She spends a lot of time early in her book contrasting Genesis with other ancient creation and flood myths that were ambient in the region, namely the *Enuma Elish* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The similarities to be found in these myths with the stories of Genesis are a scandal to certain believers in the Bible, scandalized that the Bible might not be special after all! Scholars, for

their part, in their close study of these, have wielded them as a sort of weapon. “See, the Bible isn’t so special after all!”

Robinson reads these otherwise. She finds that, in their similarities, where they differ is thrilling—for, whereas these other ancient creation and flood stories stress humankind as a bother, a trivial afterthought for the busy, bickering, self-involved gods, the stories of Genesis, and the God they tell of, are utterly engaged with the creatures of God’s making, and most of all with the human being. “The remarkable realism of the Bible,” Robinson writes, “the voices it captures, the characterization it achieves, are products of an interest in the human that has no parallel in ancient literature.”

Judith Shulevitz points this out in her take on Robinson’s *Reading... Writing* in *The Atlantic Monthly*, she notes that Robinson “wants us to see how radical scripture is compared with its sources. For one thing, it’s human-centered. The Babylonian epics that the Bible recasts...tell the origin myths of a passel of quarrelsome gods. The Enuma Elish’s gods created people so that they would serve their Creators—build their temples, grow their food. Robinson writes, ‘There is nothing exalted in this, no thought of enchanting these nameless drudges with the beauty of the world.’ In Genesis, by contrast, humankind is made in God’s image; all the sublimity of biblical Creation seems to be meant for the benefit, [the delight, of humankind. We move from gods indifferent to our well-being to a God obsessively focused on us,] besottedly, jealously, lovingly focused on us.

I mean, what God other than one deeply concerned with us would notice of the human being: “It is not good for the human to be alone...” This is wonderous empathy. “I will make another, a partner, a helper for the human.” This is a lovely act of compassion and kindness, generosity, thoughtfulness. It reminds me of a phantom line in a collection of essays I read over the summer. Light reading, it was supposed to be, something I didn’t underline any of, I didn’t take that sort of critical account of. This was just for fun: *The Peanuts Papers: Writers and Cartoonists on Charlie Brown, Snoopy & the Gang, and the Meaning of Life.*”

Somewhere in that collection one of the writers confesses about her (or his) childhood self, that she (or he) would, every night before bed, sneak into the kitchen to move the counter-top appliances closer together. This, so they wouldn’t be lonely over the course of the night, under its isolating darkness and its stifling silence.

I have looked and looked for this detail. (Why, oh why, didn’t I underline it? The president of my college advised of wherever you went: “Bring a book. And a pen for underlining.”) Was it

Jennifer Finley Boylan? (I think so! But I can't find it in her essay.) Was it Jonathan Franzen? (I don't think so, but it might have been, his essay spending a lot of time in his childhood home.) I have looked and looked because, though I never was too concerned about countertop appliances, I did sometimes worry that the moon was lonely and I never left one Cheerio to float alone in the puddle of milk at the bottom of my breakfast bowl: "Leave at least two or eat them all," was my regular response to the existential journey that every morning reintroduces.

It's good to have someone to relate to in your kid-thinking. Better still when it is God, and God is worried about the human's loneliness.

You'll notice I'm saying "human" here, when the translation (which I also changed) has it as "man." I pulled this bit of unorthodoxy because we lose a lot when we take this story overmuch to be about gender. The Hebrew word that gives us "man" isn't a statement of gender or even on sex but on material. *Adamah* means dust, so the word that gives us the name which now reads as masculine, Adam, is not about the male but about the material of its making. We are dust; we are clay. We are each and all *adamah*, Adam. Similarly, the creation of the woman is less about the "second sex," and more about what was once solitary now becoming partnership, what was once lonely now becoming relationship.

Which is a parallel experience that God undergoes. God is one; monotheism has moved into the neighborhood and has no plans to leave. But every once in a while, even in the Hebrew Bible, God appears with other heavenly beings, God even speaks of Godself as "we," which presages the Christian conceiving of God as Trinity, God himself as loving relationship and inter-relatedness, into which we are each and all called into loving relationship.

Douglas John Hall is a theologian I've enjoyed. I once read of him participating in a panel discussion, probably in the mid 2000's, the one theologian among professors of other sorts, presenting their points of view before an audience of college students. I can't remember what the topic was, but I remember, in reading about it, that the conversation turned to what people are for, whether we're of any value, whether there are too many of us, whether we're ultimately only destructive, depleting our environments, slaves to our appetites, altogether too eager to make war against one another, fundamentally unable to choose the good.

Hall was surprised to discover he took the charge in arguing for our belovedness. He was surprised because more typically the church-man among the lot would be scold. But the church is always to be a contrarian voice, an adversarial voice, if you will, to the insistence of the world. Now, when the commonplace conclusion about us is that the earth would better off were we to die

off, he came to recognize it as an essential task for the church to take up, to hold in clear focus, the wonder of the human being, the glorious wonder of the human being.

“What is the human that you are mindful of him, of her, of them?” is a favorite verse of mine from scripture. It assumes that God is, first of all. It assumes that God is mindful of us, each of us, which corresponds with my experience. And whether this experience of mine is due Psalm 8 being spoken into my childhood, most Sunday mornings of which I spent in church, or is because this truth was one I’ve known and, having found an articulation of it, now chimes in my heart, I can’t say. And I know that this mindfulness of God as regards the human has been felt as oppressive, an eye in the sky monitoring your every move more than an attentive heart that can’t be distracted from the loveliness of you.

I’m sorry if that’s been the case for you. Truly, if God’s mindfulness of you has felt more about catching you up in error and shame than about desiring your companionship and longing for your return, your embrace, I’m sorry. And if that’s the case, maybe now’s a good time to reconsider.

Thanks be to God.