

We Live, We Love: Stories from Genesis
God and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

The story from [Genesis 2-3](#)

Do you know Judith Viorst's book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*? I was reminded of it this last spring when I read it with Alex, my kindergarten buddy at Rosemary School. Alex loved it mostly because the main character had the same name as his. I loved it because I'd almost forgotten this sweet, sad story about a child that could just as easily have been any one of us.

In the story, Alexander's day starts to go south from the moment he wakes up, before he even gets dressed and starts breakfast. The gum he had carefully saved on the side of his bed last night somehow ended up in his hair. He forgot he'd left his skateboard on the floor, and he tripped over it. He dropped his sweater in the bathroom sink...while the water was running. And from there the day only got worse. His brother got the good seat in the car on the way to school. The teacher noticed him at all the wrong times during the school day. His best friend declared he liked Alexander only third-best. His mom forgot to put dessert in his lunchbox. The whole day went from bad to worse. Lima beans for dinner. The only clean pajamas were the ones he hated. This was the second grade version of a day from hell, causing minor situational depression.

Alexander can think of only one way out. And so more than once in the story, after he announces that this is a "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day," he says, "I think I'll move to Australia." Very smart; when things start to look irredeemable, you can always leave town. But his mother is a wise woman. In the last line of the book, she says, evenly, "Some days are like that...even in Australia."

For the next few months, we're going to keep coming back to the stories of Genesis. I've called this sermon series *We Live, We Love* because Genesis is an anthology of stories about family. About how hard it is to love one another, even the people we are closest to—the ones you sometimes want to go to Australia to get away from (unless you're Bruce Hallinan). Stories about the kind of conflict we often call 'dysfunction'. How difficulty just seems to be hard-baked into our relationships.

And so today, we begin at the beginning, which is what the word "Genesis" means. Genesis is the first book of the Bible, but it is not the oldest book. It actually wasn't written until about 500 years before the birth of Jesus, which puts its writing almost 2,000 years after a man called Abraham and his children began telling the stories of God. For all that time, those stories were told out loud, carried down from generation to generation, recited from memory as families sat around campfires, and as they gathered for holidays. They were never intended to be explanations of history or science. These stories were about meaning. They answered the question, "Why are things are like this?"

And these stories said, from the very beginning, there was family. God created a man. Out of his own breath, God created this creature different from all the other living things on earth, more like God himself than anything that had been created before. But it became clear quickly that it wasn't good for the man to be alone. God tried giving the man birds and animals to hang around with, but none of those filled his need for companionship. And so, God created a woman—out of the very bones of the man. Which is to say: they were linked; they needed one another. They were so connected, so unconscious of any differences between them, the story tells us, that only a metaphor could help us see: “Both of them were naked, and they felt no shame.”

For a while, things were good. Every evening, God would walk in the garden with the man and the woman. The created ones felt comfortable, safe, loved—with their Creator and with one another, just like family is supposed to be. Until one day a serpent—a creature the story calls ‘cunning’—planted a seed of suspicion in the woman. “Did God really say that you’re not supposed to eat from *any* of those delicious-looking trees in the garden?” he asked Eve. “No,” she said; “there’s just one tree that he said not to touch, because it’s not good for us.” “Well, that’s strange,” the serpent said; “because I know you won’t die if you eat that fruit. God probably just didn’t want you to be smart, like he is. I’m just saying, maybe God wanted to keep you in some subservient position. Maybe God didn’t actually mean what he said about that ‘created in God’s image’ thing.”

Do you know how it is when a seed of distrust gets planted in your head? When a tiny piece of doubt enters your mind about someone you thought you could trust? Relationship begins to unravel. Distance grows. Those sideways looks that didn’t seem to have much significance yesterday suddenly look like evidence that confirms your suspicion. That’s what happened in the garden.

Eve’s mistrust simmered inside of her like a cancer. Why wouldn’t God share everything with them? What was God trying to keep them from knowing?

You know the story. She ate the fruit. Adam ate too. What was it that made them do it? Rebellion, a conscious decision to disobey the one limitation God had given them? Had the serpent opened up in them a kind of ambition to be more Creator-like themselves, to live without limits? Or had that mistrust planted by the serpent grown into a resentment of the same God who just a day before they had felt totally safe with?

Suddenly everything felt all wrong. Tarnished. Distorted. They looked at each other and at themselves, and suddenly their nakedness—their unprotected exposure to one another—seemed shocking, shameful. They hid themselves. From God. From one another. They moved to Australia.

In the history of our tradition, this story has often been used to explain a deep and unforgiving anger in God. Some have said that by eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve planted a breach in the relationship between Creator and humans that would not be bridged for thousands of years. That a terrible sacrifice would have to be made to appease God’s anger. But that’s not what I hear in this story.

I hear this: God came to the garden at the same time as every other night, looking for his companions. “Where are you?” God called. But they were gone. They had hidden. Separated themselves. Turned their faces away from this relationship that had given them life. Locked themselves in the small room of their shame, resentment, their unwanted vulnerability. They didn’t want God to see them, or to walk with them. Feeling alienated is insidious; it wouldn’t be long before they didn’t much want to walk with each other, either.

This is so often what we humans do when things go bad. We move out of connection, away. Nurse our aloneness. Remove ourselves—from God and from one another.

The Genesis stories remind us that it has always been hard to be in relationship, and to stay in relationship. We are born for connection—intimacy and love. “Communion” you might even call it; that’s what it means to be made in the image of God. But it is so darn hard not to feel disappointed with other people, with God, even with ourselves. Nothing goes quite as we think it should. Over and over again, in our disappointment or our pride or our mistrust, we turn away from the connections that have the capacity to be life-giving for us.

“Where are you?” God calls to us, every time we turn away. This is the framework for the whole rest of the biblical story—from the stories of Genesis to the stories of Jesus. God trying to re-connect, to find us in all the rational explanations we have hidden ourselves in, in the corners where we nurse our grievances. The first stories, the stories of Genesis, are—maybe not so surprisingly—about the same things that trouble our lives today: relationship, connection, our need for love and all the things we do to push love away.

The Psalmist wrote,

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?*

...

*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. (Psalm 139)*

Lucky for us, God seems not to be so troubled by what uneven, temperamental relationship partners we are. *That’s* how much God needs you, yearns for you. “Where are you?” God calls, every time you turn away. There is place so distant that it’s beyond the reach of that voice. Not even Australia.

Sources

Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*

Jay Emerson Johnson, *Divine Communion*

The story of creation, from Stephen Mitchell's translation of the book of Genesis:

At the time when the Lord made earth and heaven—before there were any plants on the earth and before any grasses had sprouted, for the Lord had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground...the Lord formed a man from the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

And the Lord planted a garden in Eden, to the east, and he grew from the ground every kind of tree that is beautiful to look at and good to eat from, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the Lord took the man he had formed and put him in the garden of Eden, to work it and care for it. And the Lord said to the man, "From all the trees in the garden you are allowed to eat. But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are not allowed to eat; for as soon as you eat from it, you will die.

And the Lord said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a partner to help him." So from the ground the Lord formed all the animals and all the birds and brought each one to the man to see what he would call it. And whatever the man called it, that was its name. And the man gave names to all the birds and to all the animals; but for the man no partner was found.

So the Lord caused a deep trance to fall upon the man. And as the man slept, the Lord took out one of his ribs and closed up his side with flesh. And he built the rib into a woman, and he brought her to the man. And the man said, "This one at last is bone from my bone and flesh from my flesh. She will be called woman, because from man she was taken." And both of them were naked, the man and his wife, and they felt no shame.

Now the serpent was more cunning than any creature the Lord had made. And he said to the woman, "Did God really say that you're not allowed to eat from any tree in the garden?"

And the woman said, "We *are* allowed to eat from any tree in the garden. It's just the tree in the middle of the garden that we must not eat from, because God said, 'If you eat from it, or even touch it, you die.'"

And serpent said, "You will not die. God knows that as soon as you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil."

And when the woman saw that the tree was good to eat from and beautiful to look at, she took one of its fruits and ate, and gave it to her husband, and he ate too. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

And they heard the sound of the Lord walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And the man and his wife hid from the Lord among the trees of the garden.

And the Lord called to the man, "Where are you?"