



**Distant from God**  
**Genesis 3:22-24, 6:1-7**  
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Washington Street UMC  
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Throughout this summer, we are looking at the arc of the universe – that is, we are zooming out from the individual stories that make up the Biblical narrative to look at God’s story more wholistically. While every individual story takes place within a certain context, among a specific time frame, and amidst a certain people, all of these stories fall within the greater arc of God’s relationship with creation.

Last week, we began in the beginning with the creation of humanity in the *imago dei* (the image of God). In God’s image we were formed; in the likeness of God, we were made to share in the work of creating new life; with the same purpose as God, we were made to have dominion over creation and to maintain the well-being of all of God’s created, which God deemed to be very good. In the act of creating, breathing life into, and speaking to humanity, God formed an intimacy with humanity.

This *was* God’s design; this *is* God’s desire.

And yet, in this intimacy, God established with humanity with a genuine relationship. Speaking of this God-and-human relationship, Dr. Bruce Birch offers, “You’re only in a genuine relationship if you’re vulnerable in that relationship.” In the formation of this unique intimacy with humanity, God was willing to be wounded, and wounded God was.

Into the story comes a serpent, one among the non-human part of creation, enticing the humans to be *even more* like God and to know “good and evil.” Even having all that God has given them, which included a plentiful abundance of food, freedom, and companionship, the humans wanted more. Even having dominion over the whole of creation, the humans were enticed by the very creation they had dominion over to try and take dominion over the singular entity they did not control: God.

Usually, we look at the story of the eviction from Eden as a great punishment by God. It is often spoken of as the “great separation,” where humanity was distanced from God, kicked out of Eden, and cut off from God’s presence and mercy.

There’s little doubt that in the midst of this story in Genesis 3 that God was displeased. This story of eviction ends in Genesis 3:22-24, which reads, “the Lord God sent [the man] forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.”

Not only did God kick them out of Eden, but the cherubim and the flaming sword are indicators that God is not going to easily let them back in.

And yet, while this story is so often understood to be a witness of God's harsh response to humanity's error, there is still mercy and grace in the midst of the story. As the great theologian Walter Brueggemann offers, "The miracle is not that they are punished, but that they live."<sup>i</sup>

Keep in mind, as the story is told, there are still just two humans at the time of the eviction: Adam and Eve. God could have easily started over with the sixth day of creation, forming new humans, and perhaps forming them to be a little more disciplined. But this isn't how God works. God is not a master puppeteer, pulling the strings of our lives to ensure we do just as God would desire. No, in the beauty of God's creation, God creates with the blessing of freedom.

Humanity is thus sent forth, given a new life beyond the perfection that was the Garden of Eden. And as we will soon find out, "The fall is not a singular event. It is a trajectory of human destiny that arcs away from the divine plan."<sup>ii</sup>

Going forth from the garden, Eve gave birth to a second generation, first Cain and then Abel. As you may remember, the Lord took a preference for the sacrifice of Abel, and Cain became jealous and killed his brother. Another example of humanity's preference for power and self-absorption.

In the eye-for-an-eye mentality that is often used to describe the Biblical tradition of retribution, one would assume that the Lord would have killed Cain as a punishment. But that's not what happens. The Lord, ever so angry, did not kill Cain, but instead sent him away to be a wanderer of the earth. He was forced away from his family, settling in the land of Nod, east of Eden. There, in the land of Nod, Cain took a wife and they had multiple generations of children. Even in the midst of the punishment, there was mercy.

Back home, Adam and Eve had another child, named Seth. Chapter 5 of Genesis is an ancestry story that tells the generations born of Adam and Eve, through Seth, to Enosh, to Kenan ... all the way down to Noah. The created humanity were doing as God had first instructed: they were being fruitful and multiplying.

As we get to Genesis 6, we find this story about the multiplication taking an odd turn. Genesis 6, verse 1, begins, "When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose." What is translated as "sons of God" in this text is not just human sons, but is instead a reference to angelic beings of heaven. The text is confusing, and perhaps a little too intertwined with the stories of Greek mythology, but the narrative indicates that some immortal beings – called the Nephilim – had engaged in procreation with human women.

God was already weary of the actions of humanity, and now, these humans are recreating with immortal beings whose offspring may turn out to be even more rebellious. You can see God's first act in response to the offspring of these immortal and mortal activities is to limit the term of human life. Prior to this time, we see humanity living for centuries, including Methuselah, who lived to 969 years old. No longer. "The Lord said, 'My spirit shall not abide in mortals for ever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred and twenty years.'"

But even beyond God's displeasure in these immortal / mortal connections, we find that the trajectory of human sinfulness is widespread and only getting worse. Verse 5 reads, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually."

This isn't just one problem; this isn't just the error of Adam and Eve in the garden. The first sin has snowballed into a widespread and ever growing issue. In fact, it's so bad, "God was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved his heart."

The Hebrew word for *grieved*, which is *'asav* (awt-sav), comes from the same root as the word used in Genesis 3:16, which talks about the pain women will have during childbearing. The word is more than some form of emotional disappointment, but instead defines a very real, muscular, and bodily agony. In his commentary, Miguel De La Torre notes, "God is grieved because God is emotionally invested in humanity."<sup>iii</sup> Scholar R. R. Reno adds, the divine sorrow "suggest that humanity is deeply relevant to God's identity. What happens to us matters fundamentally to God, so much that God cannot be God if our sin has the final say over the future of creation."<sup>iv</sup>

If the first bend of the arc of creation is defined by intimacy with God – our being created in the likeness of God – the second bend is defined by our distance from God. Humanity has seemingly done all it can to run from the wholeness of the garden to a place where we could not be more distant from the image in which we were created.

"So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'"

Can we be honest with each other? This response is troubling. "In God's pain, God destroys all living things."<sup>v</sup> As theologian Miguel De La Torre summarizes, "the deluge [of the flood] reverses creation, as if God hit the reset button."<sup>vi</sup>

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I debated with myself this week about how to wrap up this sermon. Leaving the story with the decimation of creation feels incomplete, like walking away on Good Friday with Jesus in the grave. You and I both know there's more to the story.

But the ark, and the flood, and the life that will follow the flood ... that's a story in and of itself. The arc of the universe stretches a long way in what is just a 40-day flood. So we'll get there next week.

For today, I want us to leave with two observations. First, God created all of creation and called it good. *Very good*. And here, we find that God is feeling some form of way about that creation not looking so good anymore. God is feeling a divine sorrow in having ever created any of it. God *is* impacted "by the suffering, hurt, and circumstance of creation."<sup>vii</sup> God's desire for creation is not for it to experience such pain, brokenness, and misery.

And second, in God's infinite wisdom, as the story goes, God did not just wipe humanity off the earth. God is going to "blot out ... people *together* with animals and creeping things and birds of the air." The well-being of humanity is directly connected with the well-being of the rest of creation; and the brokenness of humanity is directly connected with the brokenness of the rest of creation. Creation exists as a singular entity, where every part of creation is dependent upon the other.

And finally, though God is displeased with humanity, God is still committed to the creation that was given life in Genesis 1 – a creation that is dependent upon humanity's dominion: our stewardship, care, concern, and oversight of that which is created around us. God is still committed to humanity, the part of creation that is formed in God's image. And, just like when God sent Adam and Eve forth from the garden, and Cain to be a wanderer of the earth, God finds a way to offer grace and mercy amidst the sin. God will offer life where death was thought to be inevitable. God will find a way to redeem creation. Let us hold on to that hope! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982.

<sup>ii</sup> R. R. Reno. *Genesis: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre. *Genesis: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Reno.

<sup>v</sup> De La Torre.

<sup>vi</sup> De La Torre.

<sup>vii</sup> Brueggemann.