

2018 BISHOP'S SERIES:
RECONCILIATION:
UNBINDING HEARTS



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What Makes for a Good Story?

At the heart of every good story is a tension needing to be resolved. This is a fundamental truth for authors and movie directors. For example,

- Tension is created when the audience hopes for one outcome of a situation and is afraid of another.¹
- Tension in a short story or novel is part of what keeps readers turning the pages.²
- Or, more colorfully, in the words of Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde: “The suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.”

At the heart of the Bible’s story is a tension that emerges in its very first chapters.

The First Pole of the Tension

One pole of the tension is the wild, overflowing generosity of a Creator-God, who fashions a wondrous world and then turns it over to human beings for safekeeping. In Genesis 1 and 2 we read two “takes” on the story of creation.

Genesis 1 casts the creation story as a seven-stanza litany describing seven days on which God creates the universe, solely by uttering a solemn Word: “Let there be...” Six of the stanzas end with a repetitive formula: “And there was evening and there was morning, the ____ (first, second, third, etc..) day” and seven times the Creator pronounces his handiwork “good.”



Genesis 2 offers a more down-to-earth, homespun version of the creation story. Instead of creating via a sovereign word over the span of a cosmic week, Genesis 2 depicts “the day” (Genesis 2:4) in which the work of creation is accomplished. Rather than being the culmination of God’s creative activity on the sixth day (Genesis 1), the second chapter of Genesis starts with God like a sculptor kneeling down to form a man from “the dust of the ground,” breathing into the man’s nostrils the breath of life. The rest of the creation—including a wondrous woman for the lonely man—flows forth from the moment the man becomes a living being.

In spite of the differing nuances we perceive in Genesis 1 and 2, both renditions of the creation story make certain things clear:

- God and God alone is the Creator of a wonderfully good creation.
- God’s creative activity is responsible for the amazing expanse of the universe as well as the dazzling diversity of created things: heavenly bodies, light, darkness, the earth itself, all living things, and humanity as the culmination of God’s creative activity.
- Though God loves the whole creation, God declares a special relationship with human beings, for they alone are created “in [God’s] image,” given “dominion” (Gen. 1:27-28) over the Creation, and embedded in a delightful³ garden, to “till it and keep it.” (Gen. 2:15)

¹ <http://www.scriptmag.com/features/storytelling-strategies-interstellar>

² <https://shelleywidhalm.wordpress.com/2012/06/24/achieving-tension-in-storytelling/>

³ “Eden” means “delight” in the Hebrew language.

Genesis 1 and 2 furnish one pole of the tension that marks the biblical story: the cascading generosity of the Creator who forms a special bond with human beings and gives them responsibility for tending God’s world and reflecting (“imaging”) God’s unconditional love.

The Second Pole of the Tension

In the third chapter of Genesis, the other pole in the tension underlying the biblical story emerges.

A slippery tempter appears on the scene, sowing seeds of doubt in the humans by zeroing in on the only limitation God had placed upon them: to avoid the fruit of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:17)

The intimate relationship between Creator and creature is suddenly threatened by this crafty, serpentine tempter. God’s word is questioned, God’s motives impugned, God’s commandment set aside. . . .and the man and his mate succumb to the notion that they can “be like God” (Gen 3:4).



Although the story narrated in Genesis 3 is commonly called “The Fall,” a better title for it might be “The Rebellion.” The human creatures, rather than trusting their Creator, wanted to be on a par with God. Why be content with creaturehood, when they can take the place of the Creator?

The generous, over-flowing love of the Creator is deemed insufficient by the humans. Trust degenerates into distrust and mistrust. This is the essence of sin: being unable to take God at God’s word, **no longer believing the promise that God always means us well.**

With the emergence of this second pole, the tension at the heart of the whole Bible comes out into the open: ***Though God is utterly trustworthy, human beings aren’t buying it.*** And the results of this rebellion infect all the harmonious relationships that God built into the very fabric of the creation: the man blames the woman, the woman blames the serpent, and they all blame God: “the woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:12)

The rebellion of the man and woman against their Creator-God has devastating consequences, not just for their own relationship with the Creator, but for the creation itself. The tempter, the woman, the man and the ground itself are all accursed (Gen 3:14-19). Death now marks the end of every human’s story.

And the curse becomes inter-generational in scope. The sin of the parents is passed on to their descendants, their first son being murdered by their second son (Genesis 4:1-16). Soon sin and death soon engulf the world.

Things get so desperate that “the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 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.’” (Genesis 6:6-7)

But here’s where things get even more interesting.

Although God cannot tolerate the wickedness that has invaded his creation—he also can’t bring himself to blot out humanity, not to mention the rest of the creation. So, just as the Lord plans a world-destroying Flood, he also provides an escape hatch: Noah and his family miraculously survive the Flood, along with enough creatures to repopulate the world (Genesis 6:9-8:22)

Here we see clearly the tension at the heart of the biblical story: Despite their wickedness, God remains hopelessly in love with God's creatures. **Rather than wiping everything out, God embarks on a heroic quest for reconciliation with humanity and with the creation itself.**

Relentlessly Pursuing Reconciliation

God's unfailing pursuit of reconciliation with his beloved wayward ones—you and me—is what the biblical story is all about. This daring quest reaches its climax in God's own decision to enter the world in the flesh of Jesus, newborn son of Mary, who eventually gives his very life for us on the Cross of Calvary.

As I write this Bible study on New Year's Eve, I still hear ringing in my ears the opening line of the Prayer of the Day for this First Sunday of Christmas: *"Almighty God, you wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and yet more wonderfully restored it. In your mercy, let us share the divine life of the one who came to share our humanity, Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord..."*⁴

This restoration, God's relentless quest for reconciliation, will be our focus in these 2018 monthly Bible studies. My goal—and my prayer—is that as we walk through the Bible's great stories of reconciliation we'll keep running into ourselves. May God unbind our hearts from all that enslaves us so that we can taste afresh the freedom of being bound to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

For Reflection or Discussion

1. How do the first chapters of Genesis help us better understand our individual lives? Our families? Our congregations? Our world?
2. In what relationships are you hungering for reconciliation right now?
3. The Apostle Paul sometimes referred to Christ as "the Second Adam." Read this paraphrase of Romans 5:18-21: *"Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person [Adam] did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person [Jesus Christ] did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right. All that passing laws against sin did was produce more lawbreakers. But sin didn't, and doesn't, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that's the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life - a life that goes on and on and on, world without end."* From **The Message** by Eugene Peterson⁵. How does this passage enrich your understanding of the reconciling work of Christ?

⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW), p. 20.

⁵ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/msg/romans/5.html>