

## **Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, January 17, 2020**

**Hymns:** 497 – Word of God, across the ages; 339 – Who made the earth and the heavens; Ancient Words; 508 – Your Word, O God

**Scripture:** Genesis 1-9 (selected verses)

**Sermon Title:** It all starts here

*1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.*

*1:26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

*2:8 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”*

*3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” “You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*

*3:8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”*

Every time a new year rolls around, there are people who tell me they want to read the Bible through, and where should they start. Usually, I tell them to start with the New

Testament, maybe Luke, and then Acts. “Why not the Old Testament?” they’ll say. “Why not just start with Genesis 1, and go on from there?”

The answer is, you don’t get too far in before you get bogged down. Starting around halfway through Exodus, the second book of the Bible, you hit long sets of instructions regarding the construction of the Tabernacle, and readers get discouraged, and pack it in. And if the second half of Exodus doesn’t do it, the book of Leviticus comes next, and that will stop most folks cold.

But even taking all that into consideration, you really do need to start in Genesis. That’s why my next Video Bible Study Series will focus on the Book of Genesis, chapter by chapter, and it starts this week – be sure to check our website or Facebook page, and join in. And it is important to bite the bullet and start in Genesis, because the first ten chapters of Genesis tell us everything we need to know, all the background information about where everything came from, where everything went wrong, who’s behind it all and, maybe most importantly, where we fit in. If you get the first ten chapters, you’ll get the rest. And that’s what this morning is all about.

And right off the bat, Genesis Chapter One Verse One, no waiting, we find out *who* this is all about: “*In the beginning, God,*” we read. God is the author of the book, and of all creation. “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,*” we read. Order from chaos. Light from darkness. A planet spinning around a sun in a solar system whizzing around a galaxy in a local group of galaxies in a universe billions of light years across that all began from nothing. All created by God. And all of it, “*Good.*” All in the first chapter. All in a chapter that answers the who (God), what (Heavens and Earth), when (the Beginning) and where (right here!) of our existence. As for the “Why?” Well, that’s where chapter two comes in.

Chapter Two, you see, tells the story of creation again, but from a different perspective. In Chapter One, we learn Who, What, When and Where. Chapter Two tells us “Why,” and the answer to Why is where everything hinges for the rest of the story. It turns out the “Why” has everything to do with relationships. It turns out the “Why” has everything to do with love. But in more ways than you think. It is about the loving relationship between us and creation, the loving relationship between us and each other, but even more importantly, it is about the loving relationship between us and God.

Us and creation? The story puts it simply: “*The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*” We are a part of creation, we derive all we need to sustain our lives from working with creation, and we are called to care for creation. This is our home, our livelihood, and our responsibility. If we care for it, if we honour it, if we love it, it will repay us a thousand-fold. It is a beautiful place, a wonderful place. *It is good.* And, if we treat the relationship as we should, if we exercise our stewardship wisely and responsibly, it will stay good.

As for the relationship between us and each other: *The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."* Don't let the phrase "helper suitable for him" throw you off. The Hebrew word for helper, "ezer," does not imply subordination of the woman to the man. After all, "ezer" is used in the Bible dozens of times, but "ezer" refers to the woman, Eve, only twice. The rest of the time, "ezer" is used as a title for God, "our help," as we sing, "from ages past." Rather than a term of subordination, "ezer" is a term of great honour. The Bible says that our basic relationship is as helpers one to another. We are made for each other. We are made to help each other, to be in relationship with each other. We are here for each other, so no one need be alone. "Help, I need somebody," sang the Beatles. "I'll get by with a little help from my friends." More than a little. And, if we treat the relationship as we should, helping one another, honouring one another, loving one another, our lives will be rich and full.

And what about the relationship between us and God? Here is perhaps the most surprising part of it all. Why was the universe created? Why was the world brought into being? Why were the skies filled with birds and the seas made to teem with life and the plants to bear fruit and the animals to roam the plains? To provide a home. For us. For God's creation. So that (and this is the important bit), so that we might enter into relationship with God, and God could extend his love to us.

God, you see, loves you. God created you to love you, created you to experience and share that love. "*God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them,*" which is to say, God created us with the ability to think, to feel, to know, to experience, to choose to love. To be in loving relationship with God. Alone among all creatures, God created us with the ability to think, to feel, to know, to experience, to choose to love.

Why were we created? To be in loving relationship with creation. To be in loving relationship with one another. And to love, and to be loved, by God. God created the world with the grand vision of dwelling together with us in the world. Us. God. Together.

It is a humbling and inspiring thought. It is humbling and inspiring to think that God even knows we are alive, let alone to think that our very existence is a result of God's desire to be in loving relationship with us. Nevertheless, God looks at us, and says, "*I love you.*" God wants nothing more than to share creation with you, to bring us all into loving relationship with one another, together to have us reflect God's own love for all the world, to spend time together with God, to celebrate creation, to celebrate life, to celebrate love. As Genesis so poignantly puts it; "*To walk together in the garden in the cool of the day.*"

So what happened? What happened to this plan? Where did the story go wrong? Well, let me tell you something about love. Love only works when it is a choice. You can't force somebody to love you, or to keep loving you. They have to choose to do so. You

may try to persuade someone to love you, you may try to set up all the conditions necessary to lead them to that choice, you may try to treat someone in such a way that they are inclined to keep loving you, but you can't force them. Take away the choice to love, and you end up with something altogether different than love. You end up with compulsion. You end up with oppression. You end up with all sorts of things that have little to do with love.

God knew this going in. God knew that if he was going to share his love with his creation, then part of that creation would have to reflect God's own ability to choose to love. And for that honour, God chose us. And to allow us a choice, Genesis describes a very simple scenario: to help us understand this idea of choice, Genesis describes a garden, a garden with two trees. One was called "*The Tree of Life.*" And the other was called "*The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.*" Not, you notice, just "The Tree of Knowledge." Not just, "The Tree of Knowledge of Good." No, it was called, "*The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.*"

*And God said, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."*

No problem, right? Any tree is yours – just not this one. Every other tree brings life. This one brings death. Couldn't be simpler – right? Right? Well, sadly, it doesn't work out that way. The serpent, the very voice and personification of temptation, takes the stage, and what's interesting is not that the serpent makes the apple look so good. What the serpent does is make God look bad. What the serpent does, with a carefully crafted series of lies, is to undermine the relationship between humanity and God. The serpent is nothing less than the timeless mechanism of temptation, which works in exactly the same way today. Watch:

*The serpent said, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"  
The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"*

The serpent's implication, the serpent's lie, is this: God is forbidding you something you want. God is actually the one tempting, and the punishment is death. God is denying you your natural desires. God is saying we can everything but that one thing, and that makes God vindictive, spiteful, unfair, mean. He stands between us and a good time. His punishments do not fit the crime. God is not good, implies the serpent. We know what is good. God does not know. We know. Don't we?

And now the second step. "*That's not true,*" the serpent lies to the woman; "*you will not die.*" God is not serious, implies the serpent. God does not mean what God says. "God," lies the serpent, "is lying." We can do what we please, we can live as we like, and there will

be no consequences to our actions. After all, God is not serious. It doesn't much matter what God says. Because, "God," lies the serpent, "doesn't mean what he says." Doesn't he?

Step number three may surprise you, but it is this: God is jealous, says the serpent. God is threatened by us. *"For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."* We don't need God, goes the lie, and God is terrified of us finding that out. We want to lay out our own rules, our own future, we want nothing to do with God, with any plan, with any purpose, with any destiny. We want to satisfy ourselves, want to be our own gods, our own judge and jury. We want to say what is good, what is evil. And we do know what is good, and what is evil. Don't we?

So the stage has been set. The serpent has introduced three ways to kill the relationship between us and God: we need simply suspect that God is not good, that God is not serious, that God is jealous. Or, put another way, the serpent sells us three lies: God does not want what we know is best for us, doesn't mean what he says, and resents our ability to go ahead and do it anyway. Look at the breakdown of any relationship, look at the withering away of a once-strong love, whether it is between parent and teenager, husband and wife, brother and sister, one-time friends, or any other relationship once based on trust, on consideration, on mutual respect. You'll hear a version of this: "We don't want the same thing. You don't mean what you say. I can't trust you anymore. You resent my success, are jealous of my happiness." Lies are powerful. Lies can break a friendship, a family, a country, in two.

As a result of all this, an interesting change in perspective happens for Eve – and for Adam, who, we are told, was with her all the time: *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*

That which was wrong and deadly is suddenly nothing but right; *good for food, a delight to the eyes*. The rationalization is complete, the choice is made. The relationship is undermined, destroyed. Love is exchanged in a selfish grab for power, for desire, for the forbidden fruit. Paradise, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, is lost. It says we were banished from the garden. Truth is, we walked out on our own steam.

Worse yet, our turning away from God damaged not only our relationship with God, but poisoned our relationship with creation, and with one another. God became, in our new and warped vision, a distant and (we suspected), often angry half-reality. Creation became a resource to be exploited. Suspicion, self-interest, jealousy and blame became part and parcel of our relationships with other people. The inevitable product of lies.

The sad consequence of it all is revealed in the picture of banishment from the Garden, with sweat and toil our lot as we struggle against the land; with dominance and

power corrupting our relationships; and, in the story of Cain and Abel, all of this bearing poison fruit in the sad killing of one brother by another. The disease spreads, until, we read (Genesis 6:5-8), *“The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.”*

But, incredibly, despite all the regrets, God doesn't give up. He finds one person, a man named Noah, *“a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.”* God will start fresh with Noah, will wipe the slate clean, will send a flood and wash the poison away. But the flood story ends badly. When things dry out, the first thing Noah does is get blind staggering drunk, passing out naked on the floor of his tent. His sons gather for a good laugh at the old man's expense. It seems the water didn't get quite deep enough. It seems the damage of the garden goes right to the heart.

So how can you fix a poison that goes so deep to the core of who we are? It is beyond our ability. But it is not beyond God. The rest of the Bible is nothing less than the outworking of God's unrelenting desire to win us back. Everything that happens from this point on is God working in and through us, in and through our world, to bring us back to the garden, where once again, in peace and harmony - in loving relationship with one another, with God, with creation itself - we would walk together in the cool of the day.

These first ten chapters tell us everything we need to know. The current state of our world is found in those first ten chapters. The glimpses of beauty, the blazing sunsets, the moments of love in our lives, are reminders of the garden that used to be. The distrust and sorrow, the disease and disappointment, the violence and grief of our world is about the choice that was made. *“Good and evil,”* said God. *“That's what the fruit will bring.”* But, as with temptation to this very day, we got all excited by the good, and ignored that other, less desirable part. And now, we're stuck.

But those first ten chapters also sow the seeds for God's amazing plan to get us back, of God's masterful design to restore his people, a design which leads us from a garden's closed gate to a stable's open door; a plan – a love - that will take the form of the one we call Jesus, the one we call Christ. The one who restores us to God. Who tells the truth. Who heals our hearts. Who calls us home. And this is where it all began – in the beginning.

It all starts here. The scene is set. The story of Salvation is under way. I look forward, over the coming weeks, of walking that path together with you. Thanks be to God. Amen.