

Coming Home: In the Garden¹

Genesis 1 – 3

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I don't know if you are going to believe this or not, but there are only four Sundays, counting today, between now and Christmas – somehow it happened again!

Now in the church we call the four Sundays before Christmas the Sundays of Advent and Advent is a Latin term that means “coming” and it refers to our longing for God to break into our broken world and set things straight.

In Old Testament days the hope was that God would send His promised Messiah to save Israel from the oppression it found itself in. Of course when Jesus showed up He didn't meet their expectation because they were looking for something too small. They wanted a king to come and fight off the Romans and instead they got God who put on skin, was born, lived and died among them to save us from the ultimate consequence of sin.

But Advent isn't just an Old Testament thing. While Jesus came 2000 years ago He left promising to return and so today we find ourselves in a second period of Advent where we are hoping for Christ's second arrival where He will finally right the wrongs of the world and come live with us forever.

Now, if you are new to this you might not realize it, but the hope of Advent is *the* story of the Bible. This isn't just a peripheral side issue, this is it. If you were to boil the entire Bible down to one sentence it would be something like God is making a way for us to be with Him again.

And so every year at this time we return to this story, not because we need something sentimental to fit with a sentimental time of year, but because this is the story we tell all year long. And so today and for the next three weeks we are going to take an overview of the Bible and unpack this. We are going to start in Creation, in the Garden where everything was perfect, and then from there we are going to travel through the fall, to redemption and to the New Creation.

And over and over again we are going to see that the God we worship is a God who wants to restore to us what we lost. You see in the beginning things were the way He wanted them to be, He made us to enjoy His presence.

The Bible starts with the words of Genesis chapter one. And if you have your Bibles I encourage you to open them up and follow along, we are going to be spending most of our time in the first couple chapters of the Bible today.

¹ Outline for series adapted from Pastor Mark Clark's “Welcome Home” series
<http://www.thisisvillagechurch.com/our-media/sermons/welcome-home-1-in-the-garden/>

Genesis 1 verse 1 says this:

[Read Genesis 1:1]

This is where everything starts for us, this is the beginning of time. But of course God predates this moment by eternity. Now if you've ever tried to wrap your mind around that it probably resulted in a headache because everything we see around us begins and ends – from the smallest amoeba to the universe itself. The only thing that isn't like this is God.

And so we have trouble comprehending what God was up to before creation began. And this has led people think that perhaps God made us because He was bored or lonely. After all eternity is a long time to be by yourself. But the Bible tells us God has no needs and so God couldn't have been bored or lonely.

Instead what we get in Scripture is the idea that God is a Trinity. That means that while there is only one God, He exists in three persons that are in perfect harmony with themselves. So there is the Father and the Son and the Spirit, and for eternity they have perfectly enjoyed each other's company.

And creation came out of this perfect happiness. God decided that He wanted to make beings that He could share His perfection with – people who could enjoy His presence. And so He created humanity.

And that's what the Garden of Eden was about. The Bible tells us God actually visited the Garden in person. He would come down and go for walks with Adam and Eve.

And then we broke that and we lost the thing we were created to participate in, the most valuable thing in the universe – the presence of God. The presence is everything.

A week ago my grandfather died, and I was talking with my mom who was very close to him, and she was telling me that the day after he died she was at his house with grandma and she just went and sat in his chair and wept. Now there is nothing special about that chair. If anything it smells a bit bad. Grandpa was a chain smoker and nobody misses his smell. But we miss his presence.

When someone dies we miss that they were there; they sat there. They said that, they did that. We miss them. We miss their presence.

And that's what's missing now that the world has been broken by sin. God isn't here with us the way He was in the beginning... Now He isn't absent. He is everywhere, and Christians have His Spirit living within us, but what we have now is at best a taste of what we were designed for.

And God's not happy with that. And so the promise at the end of the Bible is that if we entrust our lives to Him then one day we will be with Him again in Heaven.

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When I was a kid I used to think the best thing about heaven was going to be doing all the things I wanted to do, or seeing people I loved – like my grandpa. And while some of that is going to be part of it, the best thing about heaven is that we will be with God like we were created to be.

And so between these two points – Creation and New Creation – the rest of the Bible talks about God working to bring us back to what we lost, to bring us home to share in the joy of His presence, because this is what He created us for in the beginning.

And we see this throughout the Old Testament with the nation of Israel. As a people they were continually walking away from God and He was continually chasing after them and calling them back – He wanted to share His presence.

We even get this in the name God uses for Himself. When God was speaking with Moses at the burning bush and called him to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt Moses asked Him “what if the people ask me what your names is?” God responded:

I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ (Exodus 3:14)

God defined Himself relationally. He has a name and wants to be known. And then throughout the rest of the Old Testament the Great I AM continually calls and coaxes His children back to this relationship. God says things like “Do not fear, for **I am** with you.”² He told Jacob “**I am** with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”³ He spoke to Israel through the prophet Haggai saying “**I am** with you, declares the Lord.”⁴

I AM never went anywhere, He has always been here, and has always been calling out for a relationship with us. But we've been on the other side of the equation right from the beginning.

² Isaiah 40:10

³ Genesis 28:15

⁴ Haggai 1:13

If you are still in Genesis turn over a page to Genesis 3 verse 8. This takes place just after Adam and Eve ate the fruit God told them not to eat. And then we read this:

[Read Genesis 3:8]

So Adam and Eve are together in the Garden and they hear something. They hear a sound they have heard many times before. God has shown up for His walk in the garden.

Now God shows up in the cool of the day. It's not hot and sticky anymore, and evidently God enjoyed this – He'd probably love Prince George!

And so He shows up for His walk with His children in the evening.

But they weren't there to meet Him like they usually were. They were off doing something really stupid. They were hiding from YHWH.

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Almost every day at our house this game gets played. It seems like quite a strange developmental stage for me. Elliana says "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, come find me. And then I count and she does one of two things. If we are anywhere near her room she runs and wraps herself up in her drapes... same place every time. Or she classically covers her eyes with her hands.

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Now I've bragged that my kids are geniuses so this bothers me. And I've explained it lots of times. Don't hide in the same spot all the time; I know where you're going to be. And for crying out loud just because you cover your eyes doesn't mean my eyes stop working.

But there is a disconnect here and evidently it goes right back to the Garden.

Now the Bible doesn't tell us who had the brainwave to hide from God but it was just as bad an idea back then as it is today. God made this place; He knows where to look for us, and just because we close our eyes and can't see Him doesn't mean He can't see us. It's just dumb – probably Adam's idea.

But ever since this fateful day humanity has found itself in one of basically two states. Either we are seeking God and trying to get closer to Him or we are running away and hiding.

We either pursue the presence of God because we long for it, or we hide from it because we are afraid of what it might do to our lives.

And one of these paths is smarter than the other but we so often don't see it.

Think the two criminals on the crosses next to Jesus. The one cries out to Jesus to remember Him when He enters His kingdom and the other just keeps running away – I mean he didn't have anything to lose trusting Jesus but he kept running.

And so this series is about coming home. Wherever you find yourself today the call is out that we would become people who would seek the presence of God with all our might.

Jesus tells us to seek first the kingdom – make His kingdom and His righteousness the number one thing we put our mind to pursuing. This is what the whole Bible is about and this is why Jesus came.

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2000 years ago a virgin found herself pregnant out of wedlock and went and told her fiancé. Now Joseph was no dummy. He knew where babies came from. So when Mary said "trust me it's from God," he said "I'm not so sure it works that way. I'm out of here!"

But then after he considered this the Bible tells us that while he was sleeping an angel appeared to him and told him: Mary wasn't lying to you:

Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins. (Matthew 1:20-21)

Sin is what separated Adam and Eve, and what separates us, from God. And Jesus came to fix the problem of presence. He came to make it possible for us to come home to the presence of God we enjoyed in the beginning. And this is what Advent is about. It is about God coming to us so that we can come home to where we belong.

Friends, can you smell the cookies in the oven? Are you hungry for home?

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But what is it about home that we miss? What is it about the so called perfection of the Garden that is so obviously absent today? Genesis gives us the answer. Look with me at chapter 1 verse 1 again:

[Read Genesis 1:1-3]

People have always been asking questions like "where did we come from" and "Do we matter?" And the Bible answers the first question saying "everything that exists had a beginning and it came into being when I AM spoke."

Now you need to know that this was written by Moses after Israel left Egypt. And so it was written in response to the prevalent origin stories of Egypt and Babylon.

Egypt and Babylon had their own creation myths at the time this was written. And they were bloody and gory things for the most part. Either creation happened as the result of a cosmic war between the gods, or it was birthed out of some twisted sexual escapade – those are the stories everyone around Israel used to make sense of the world they lived in – the world is the way it is because this is where it came from. We call that a “worldview.”

But in the face of that God gives His story to Israel so they can understand the world around them. And He says the world wasn’t made out of some divine war between gods, instead it is the result of a loving creator – I AM behind this.

And so creation isn’t a product of divine boredom or because God needed some slaves to do His bidding – that’s what these other myths proposed. Instead YHWH creates to share Himself with us because the only thing better than enjoying perfection is allowing others to enjoy your perfection too.

And then throughout the first chapter Genesis describes creation contrasting I AM the loving Creator with Merduk from Babylon and Atun from Egypt.

And so I AM’s creation is spoken into existence. In verse 3 God says “Let there be light.” And light appears. There is no cosmic battle as enemy forces try to oppose Him – God is sovereign so much so that what He says comes to pass.

And then God names His creation showing how much He cares for it and asserting His dominion over it. In ancient times to name something was to prove you were its loving master. And so in verse 5 we read “God **called** the light “day,” and the darkness He **called** “night.” In verse 8 it says “God **called** the vault ‘sky.’” And verse 10 says “God **called** the dry ground ‘land.’”

And then look at verse 16:

[Read Genesis 1:16]

Now in Egypt the people worshipped the sun and the stars as their source of life. But Genesis says don’t waste your time worshipping the created, they are just lights. And I AM is so powerful that the millions of stars peoples stood in awe of were thrown in almost like an afterthought – it just says “He also made the stars.”

Now lots of people today have a hard time with this because our culture has been working hard to come up with an origin story, a worldview, that doesn’t need God. But it’s got some problems.

Until the 1920's the belief in the scientific community was that "everything we see has just always been here – it just always existed (then you don't need a creator) and that worked." But then in 1929 Hubble came along and demonstrated that the universe was expanding and therefore had a beginning.

And so scientists today say the Big Bang happened about 4 billion years ago. But that still leaves them in a pickle because 4 billion and one years ago it had to come from somewhere. But our worldview still works. Our loving Creator spoke and "bang" there it was.

But God's not just interested in telling us where we came from, He wants to answer our need to know "Do we matter?" And this is something science can't do. And God answers this by breathing identity into us. Look at verse 26:

[Read Genesis 1:26-27]

The word that jumps out of these verses is the word "image". And this is a word used in idol making.

Remember that when this is written the cultures all around Israel are carving idols in the image of their gods. And the thought was that when an idol took on the physical resemblance of a god, that god would come and live within the statue and so the idol itself would be endowed with its power. So while the people knew that Ra, the Egyptian sun god, was not a lump of wood. Because the idol they carved looked like Ra, Ra's spirit would come and live within it and they could pray to it and Ra would hear and answer.

And that is the imagery that is being referred to here. Notice that God is making mankind in His own image, so we bear His likeness. So every person matters because God matters. To harm a human is like defacing money; it's treason against the one we image. This is why Christians oppose abortion and say "no" to euthanasia, because the value of life has nothing to do with our comfort, it comes from the fact that we image God and He matters.

And also notice that because we bear God's image we are endowed with His power. Like God has dominion over creation naming "day" and "night", people (in verse 26) also are given dominion.

So friends, if you are being controlled by your circumstances that is inhumane by biblical standards. The circumstances in our lives don't have the right to control us. It is human for us to have dominion over the world we live in – our health, our finances, our relationships – because when we are living in dominion we look like the God we image.

Now this doesn't mean nothing sad or painful happens to Christians – painful things happened to Jesus – but that our identity isn't shaken by these situations. That's why the Apostle Paul, in spite of being a prisoner, could tell the Philippians:

I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. (But notice what that deliverance looks like. Paul says) I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. (Philippians 1:19-21)

Paul lived in confidence knowing that his circumstances would not get the better of his soul because, like the God he imaged, he was in dominion over them.

Genesis 2 tells us why this works. Turn to verse 7.

[Read Genesis 2:7]

So it was when God's breath entered Adam that he became a "living being." You've probably heard that the word "breath" in Hebrew is the same word for spirit, so here God is putting His Spirit in people and this is what makes us alive.

And the word "living being" here is significant. In Genesis nothing else is called a "living being" – humans alone are distinguished this way. And this is where we get the notion that in contrast to everything else people have souls. In the moment that God breathed into people we became eternal beings with moral ability and responsibility.

This doesn't exist in the rest of nature. When a wolf separates a baby caribou from the herd and chases it down he kills and eats it, but he doesn't murder it – it's just nature. When a rooster forcibly copulates with a hen he impregnates her, he doesn't rape her.

There is no morality among beasts, but people are different. We have souls and so when we hear about things like these happening between people we feel there is something wrong. This doesn't happen in the animal community. Wolf families don't sit around scrutinizing killings and say "hmm, perhaps George should have let that one go. Or he should have at least picked on someone his own size." No they just join in the feast!

If people were beasts we wouldn't see anything wrong when the strong kill the weak – it would just be natural selection. But we do have a problem with this. And our problem comes from the fact we were made in the Garden and endowed with the breath of God.

And so when we look out at the world around us, and see crime and sickness, unlike every other animal we feel something is wrong and we long for a fix. And what we are longing for is a return to what we were created to experience in the beginning – we want to come home.

But no matter how much we seek it, until the New Creation, that desire will never be fully realized. But to long for this makes us human because we are beings living between two Advents.

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I'm not sure how many of you have read Tolkien's Lord of the Rings or seen the movies. If you haven't they are perhaps the most influential works of fiction in the last century. Tolkien was a devout Christian and wrote with this worldview in mind.

But sometimes he was criticized for writing "escapist literature" that people could lose themselves in. But instead of denying this and defending his work he responded: you're right, but the kind of escape I'm picturing is the kind a prisoner of war longs for. He longs to leave behind the cruel guards and starvation rations and snarling dogs, and muddy confines to go home. And Tolkien said this kind of desire for escape is what makes us human.⁵

And the Biblical narrative tells us this is human because the home we are really searching for is one we won't find until Christ re-creates and we find ourselves back in the presence of God.

And this is what Advent is about. Jesus came and initiated the fix so that we could enjoy the presence of God once again.

So as we head into Advent I want to leave you with two things: First, foster your longing for home. The world we live in is not the way it was designed to be. There is something wrong. And we are supposed to hunger for the remedy. Foster your longing for home.

And second, as Christians we were designed to bring this new reality about – not in an ultimate sense – we have to wait for Christ's return for that, but in a micro sense. Because God has breathed His Spirit into us we bear His image and possess His power of dominion. So brothers and sisters this Advent season let's foster our longing for home and let's act like our God and become the agents of re-creation Prince George needs, and Jesus made us to be.

⁵ Buchanan, Mark. "Things Unseen: Living with Eternity in your Heart" (Michigan: Ann Spangler & Assoc. Press), 2002. (chapter 1)