

Entering Narnia

Many years ago, in a small midwestern town, there was a church full of lively and caring people. But they were a small group; maybe 35 people in worship on a good day, and so they just couldn't afford a full-time minister. Luckily, they were located near a seminary; so, they would often have seminary students - who would be in their last year or two of school - to be their pastor. This worked out pretty well for them.

Except one year - just three weeks into the fall semester - when a leader from this little church called up the person at the seminary who was in charge of student ministers; and said, "I'm sorry, but this just isn't going to work for us. The fellow you sent us this year is not only incompetent, but also belligerent. In three weeks' time, he has managed to offend most of the people in our congregation. Could you send us somebody else? Anybody else?"

And so, as it happened, the person in charge of such things, whose name was Donald Mack, Dr. Mack, in his wisdom, or more likely, in desperation, sent me.

Now, you have to understand, I was, at that time, 22 years old, fresh out of college, with no experience whatsoever. I mean, I'd never even stood up in a pulpit before! I had nothing but three weeks of seminary education and some fuzzy notion that I might want to be a minister someday.

And, suddenly, I was a pastor. I met with Dr. Mack on a Tuesday, and that Sunday I led my first worship service, and preached my first sermon. Which, by the way, was awful.

Six weeks later, I did my first funeral, which was a different kind of awful. It was for a 16-year-old boy, who had skipped out of school and slammed into the back of a semi on an icy road.

This truly was trial by fire. To say that I was flailing, and that I was out of my depth, would be the understatement of the year! However, I was terribly earnest; and I very much wanted to be the pastor and preacher that these good people needed, and that they deserved.

The only thing that saved me in those days was my advisor, whom I met with every week, and who kept reminding me to not take myself too seriously; that I probably wasn't going to be such a great minister that I would build this little place into a big thriving church, nor was I so terrible that I would be able to destroy the church, or kill it off.

He would say to me, "Just relax, and love these people, and trust them." And then he said, "Let them teach you what it means to be a pastor." So that's what I tried to do.

But, remember, I was a naïve and inexperienced 22-year-old, who was still trying to figure out what it meant to be an adult, let alone a pastor. Sure, I'd grown up going to church, and Sunday school, and youth group. But I really hadn't listened to that many sermons, and I knew precious little about the Bible.

What I did know was that I was horrified by some passages in scripture, and pretty skeptical about other parts; and to be honest, not quite sure what I believed in.

So, preaching Sunday after Sunday was a terrifying prospect. I mean, who was I to talk to people about God, and faith, and the deeper meaning of life? And how could I explain these strange and unfathomable scriptures in a way that was actually helpful to people?

Now, it probably didn't help that, in my youth and naivety, I was under the impression that if a preacher just prayed hard enough, then God would guide you in what to say, and just sort of "lay the words on your heart." I tried this strategy, but it definitely was not working for me. I mean, if God was sending me any messages, they were not getting through!

And so, I struggled and I floundered.

And then, one day, in my Old Testament class, the professor began to explain to us how there are two creation stories in the Bible; and that the familiar passage in Genesis is not one long narrative, but in fact is two entirely different accounts of creation - written by different authors, probably written centuries apart, in different parts of the world.

And then he began to show us the irreconcilable differences in these two stories. And he showed us that with a little detective work, you could better understand how these stories came to be, and why they were written.

Now, for me, this was one of those rare, precious moments. It was, in fact, a life-changing event. So much so, that I can remember exactly where I was sitting that day, I can still see my friend Dave who was sitting next to me, what the room looked like, and I can see the sun streaming in on that bright September morning when, for me, the world shifted.

You see, one moment I was floundering, and flailing away in a dark closet, and in the next moment, it was as if I stepped through the back of the wardrobe and into Narnia.

Suddenly a whole new world opened up to me: a magical and mysterious world, that until now, I had no idea even existed - but now I was being invited in. All of a sudden, the Bible became approachable, and accessible. And real. Because I realized that God didn't write the Bible; nor was it written by holy people to whom God spoke and told them just what to write down – as if God's interaction with human beings was different in Biblical times. No! Instead, the Bible was written by people who were probably not that much different from you and me.

Now, I'm sure the authors had spiritual experiences; and in some cases, they were spiritual giants, whose insight and spiritual wisdom continue to inspire us. But, all in all, the people who wrote the Bible were people who were just trying to make sense of things - like we are.

Curran recently referred to me as a "Bible Geek" – which she says she meant as a compliment. And I suppose it's true that I am a Bible Geek in the sense that I continue to find the Bible fascinating.

It has been many, many years since that bright September morning when I stepped out of the dark closet and into Narnia. Over these years, I have learned a whole lot about the Bible. And I have had my share of adventures, and misadventures, in Narnia.

After all, there's a lot of ugliness in the Bible. There's no doubt about it: there are passages that reveal nothing of divine love and grace, and there are teachings that are just flat-out wrong, or they are so grounded in the assumptions and prejudices of an ancient culture that they no longer have anything to teach us.

But, that's part of why Bible study is such an adventure! Believe me when I say that I still consider the scriptures to be a magical and mysterious place, that is filled with wonders and surprises.

Now, the reason I am preaching today is because Curran invited me to share some things from the "Bible 101" class that I led last month. We had a good group, 12 of us altogether, learning new things and having lively conversation. And we hope to do more of these "Bible 101" classes.

But, I have to confess that my own motivation for preaching today, is not just to give you a glimpse of that class; rather, what I really hope is that I might give you some little glimpse of Narnia.

Now, I realize that the situation is totally different. As you and I sit here today, none of us bear much resemblance to that flailing and desperate 22-year-old seminary student!

And yet.... yet I do think we share his hunger for meaning, and for a deeper understanding of the Bible – which, after all, is the touchstone of our faith. We hunger for spiritual wisdom, and for knowledge as well.

So, what I want to do today is to try and re-create maybe just a bit of the excitement and the wonder that I discovered on that fateful day, years ago, in my first Old Testament class.

OK. Let's begin - at the beginning (!) - with the first two chapters of Genesis, which you will find as an insert in the bulletin. Please take that out. I asked Jane to read just a section from chapter 2. The part she read is the beginning of the second account of creation – The Garden of Eden story – although this is, in fact, a much earlier story than Chapter 1.

Now, how do we know that Genesis 1 and 2 are in fact two different stories, written at different times, by different authors? Well, first of all, notice the form. The Garden of Eden account is truly a story. There's action; there is a plotline. There are lots of details that are easy to remember - which is very typical of oral tradition. It's the kind of story that would have been told around the campfire for countless generations, before anybody thought to write it down.

The account in Genesis 1, on the other hand, is a more poetic form. "God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light.' And God saw that the light was good. And God called the light day... And there was evening and morning, the first day." This form gets repeated over and over, for each of the 6 days. So, this is a more carefully-constructed format, and it may well have been used in worship.

OK. The next thing to notice is the name of God. As we sang in our opening hymn, we have many names for God. That's also true in the Bible. In the 1st chapter of Genesis the word for God in Hebrew is *Elohim*. *Elohim*.

But in the 2nd chapter, at the place where Jane began reading, the name abruptly changes to "LORD God." Notice that LORD is in all caps. Any time you see this in the Bible, you know that the Hebrew word is *Yahweh*, the most sacred name for God. And notice that the way *Yahweh* is portrayed, in the Garden of Eden story, is a more primitive, a more human-like God.

This is a God who walks in the garden in the cool of the evening, and who talks directly to Adam. And definitely a hands-on God, like a craftsman, bending down to fashion Adam out of the dust, and to make Eve out of a rib.

Elohim, in contrast, in the first chapter of Genesis, has no direct interaction with human beings. This is a more sophisticated, abstract, and powerful God, who simply speaks things into being. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

So: not only different names, but different concepts of God.

OK. The next big clue is the role of water. Note the description of Eden, in the first sentence that Jane read for us today. There was no plant, no herb, and no water at all, except a spring, that rose up out of the ground. In other words, the Garden of Eden was a beautiful green oasis in the desert, much like the bulletin cover today. So, in this account, it takes a powerful God to create an oasis, a Garden of Eden, in the vast, dry, desert.

Now contrast this to chapter 1, verse 2, which says "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." In this account, water is everywhere. There is nothing but water. And verses 6 through 10 are all about getting control over all this water. God separates the waters from the waters, and in verse 9, God causes dry land to finally appear. So, in this account, it takes a powerful God to control all of that water and keep it in its place.

Now, from these clues, we can deduce that the Garden of Eden story came from a time when the Israelites were nomads, wandering in the desert. Meanwhile, the story of God creating the world in six days, most likely came from a later period in history, when the Israelites were captives in Babylon: a place where there was lots and lots of water. In fact, flooding was a major issue there.

Another way that we know that these are different stories is that the order of creation is so different. In the Garden of Eden story, the very first thing God creates is a man, and then, everything else – the trees and plants, then all other the creatures. And, only then, does God creates a woman, as a “helper” for man.

However, in the first chapter of Genesis, the Six Days of Creation, God creates everything else – plants and animal and birds and fish. Then finally, on the sixth day, kind of as a crowning achievement, God creates human beings. And please note, there is no sense here in which man is created first, or that men and women have different roles. No. Verse 27 – “God created humankind in God’s image male and female God created them.”

And finally, one more clear indication that these are different accounts. The Garden of Eden story is all about good and evil, and why bad things happen, and why life is so hard for us humans. But in the Genesis 1, the phrase we hear this phrase again and again, “And God saw that it was good.” Verse 31 – “And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” In this account, it is a beautiful world, with no hint of evil.

In fact, according to Genesis 1, the most important thing for us humans to do is to honor the Sabbath, as God did: to take a rest from all our work and striving, as Curran urged us to do in last week’s sermon. Contrast this to the Garden of Eden story, where there is absolutely no mention of Sabbath. Hah! No rest for the wicked.

All right: enough of the Biblical critique. Now, for some people, this kind of in-depth analysis of the Bible may be unsettling, if not outright blasphemous. But to me, this kind of study doesn’t make the Bible any less compelling, nor is it any less true.

I believe both of these stories of creation are true in the sense that they speak truth about this amazing, splendiferous creation, which God saw as good. But, by the same token, like Adam and Eve, we are accountable for our actions. We do get led astray, and there are consequences. Also, even although there may never have been a literal Garden of Eden, we do have a sense that this broken world we inhabit is not the world that God intends for us, and that something has been lost.

So that’s it, my friends: A Geek’s view of the Bible. If I didn’t exactly open up Narnia for you this morning, I hope that at least I piqued your interest in the study of scripture. Because we who are liberals and progressives cannot, cannot, just give over the Bible to conservatives, with all of their misunderstandings and misinterpretations of scripture, which do so much damage. No!

It is our Bible, too. We need to speak up for the God we meet in the Bible: A loving, inclusive God, who relentlessly advocates for the oppressed. We need to speak up for the Christ whom we meet in the scriptures: a Christ who both comforts and challenges, and who calls us to live with compassion, and to work for love and for justice for all.

May we never stop speaking our biblical truth. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.