

## I

First words are often very important words, because they often set the stage for important things to come later. For example, almost exactly one year ago today, I was in Fort Worth, Texas, walking to the neighborhood bus stop to meet my kids after school, when my cell phone rang. I did not recognize the 706 area code, but I answered it anyway, and a voice on the other end, in a deep, charming Southern accent, said, “Ryan? Lewis Hudgins in Athens, Georgia. How are you today?” Those first words set the stage for many conversations yet to come.

## II

First words are often very important words. Perhaps you still remember the first words that someone important to you ever spoke to you, or the first words of a favorite novel or movie. First words so often set the stage for everything that will come next.

## III

Today, we will consider some important first words. For the next nine months, in our worship life together we’re going to be following a schedule of readings that will take us through the broad narrative arc of the biblical story. Between now and Christmas, we’ll be reading and preaching stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly called the Old Testament. From Christmas through Easter, we will read and preach through the Gospel According to Mark, and from Easter to Pentecost, we will read and preach from the Acts of the Apostles and a few of the letters of the Apostle Paul. Our hope is that by organizing our reading and preaching in this way, over the course of this academic year, we begin to view the biblical story as a unified whole.

Our reading this morning comes to us from the Book of Genesis, which means, “beginning.” Although we’re not starting at chapter one, verse one, our reading this morning will cover the very first words ever spoken by a human being as recorded by Scripture. So with that in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Genesis, chapter 2, verses 4-9 and 15-25:

*In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up — for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground — then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

The first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis form what bible scholars refer to as "prehistory narratives." The accounts of creation, the story of the Fall, the trouble between Cain and Abel, the saga of Noah and the Ark and the Great Flood, the story of the Tower of Babel, are etiologies, that is, they are our ancient Israelite ancestors' answer to the age-old question, "How did the present state of things come to be the way that they are?"

There are, of course, many different ways to read the book of Genesis. Some read it as a science book. Some read it as a history text. Others have studied it as classic Near Eastern literature.

But for us, when we read the bible, we are not so much looking for science or history or literature. We are looking for theology. We are asking, "What does this text teach us about the nature of God? What does this text teach us about the nature of the created order? What does this text teach us about who we are and what we have to do with each other?"

In Genesis, every time God creates something, God calls it good. Over and over again in Genesis 1, we read the phrase, "And God saw that it was good."

But in chapter 2, for the very first time in the biblical story, God calls something "not good." God says, "It is not good that the human should be alone."

And so God creates the animals of the fields and the birds of the air, and brings them to the human, but the creation is still incomplete. And so from the rib bone of one

human, God forms another human. And when the first human awakes, he looks at his fellow human being and says, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”

This is not first and foremost a story about gender or marriage, although it’s certainly been read and interpreted that way down through the years. This is first and foremost a story about a generous God who creates and infuses the creation with abundant goodness. This is first and foremost a story that teaches us that we are incomplete without one another.

That’s not to say that it’s God’s divine will that all people should be married, nor is it to say that being single somehow makes one deficient or in any way less than human. The Scriptures lift up Jesus of Nazareth as the picture of what God desires for all humankind, and nowhere does the text suggest that Jesus was married.

But according to Scripture, the very first words ever spoken by a human being were about another human being. “This is at last bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” According to Scripture, God’s creation was not complete until one human being was placed in relationship with another human being. According to the very beginning of the biblical story, we were created by God to be in community with one another.

#### IV

And I suspect, my sister, that this seems all fine and good, so long as we’re talking about people to whom you’re blood related or at least people that you like. I suspect, my brother, that the idea that we were created to be in community with one another seems fine, so long as we’re talking about people who look like you, think like you, pray like you, and vote like you. But you and I both know that the world is not like that.

I spent my earliest years in small towns, but when I was in the first grade, our family moved to Houston, Texas, which was then and is now one of the largest and most diverse cities in the country. That Christmas, I received a shiny new bicycle, and that afternoon, I took it out for a spin. Just down the street was another boy about my age, and I spotted him playing in his front yard. I pulled to the curb and showed off my new bike, and he admired it appropriately. Then I said to him, “What did you get for Christmas?” And his answer shocked me to my very core. “We don’t celebrate Christmas in our house,” he said matter-of-factly.

I was absolutely incredulous. I had heard of children being threatened with a lump of coal in place of a present, but for the life of me, I could not imagine what kind of trouble this boy must have caused to have Christmas canceled outright. With wide eyes and in a voice barely above a whisper, I said, “What’d you *do*?”

“I didn’t *do* anything, silly,” he said. “We’re Muslim. We don’t celebrate Christmas.”

I was too young to understand what that meant, so I shrugged my shoulders, and we played for a while longer until it was time to go inside. But all these years later, I still remember that Christmas afternoon. For the first time in my life, I had encountered someone in my little world, someone who lived on my street, someone who went to my school, who didn't believe and pray and worship exactly like me. For the first time in my life, I had encountered diversity.

And can we be honest with each other? Cognitively, we know that diversity is a good thing. Biblically, we know that God has woven diversity into the very fabric of the created order. Morally and ethically, we know that diversity should be celebrated and lifted up in every community.

But when we encounter diversity, it has the power to startle us, like learning that not everyone in Houston, Texas, or Athens, Georgia, celebrates Christmas. And for those of us who come from privileged communities that have been in the majority for most of our lives and for the lifespans of most of our ancestors, encountering diversity can make us a bit fearful on an emotional, gut level.

And you and I see that playing out right this very moment in our national conversations, and in our schools, and in our communities. In 21<sup>st</sup> century America, we are encountering diversity in almost every conceivable way. Worldviews that once held center stage for decades, even centuries, in our nation are being challenged in both the public and private spheres. And for those of us who have benefited in tangible and intangible ways from that privileged point of view, all of that can cause us to be a little bit startled, even a little bit frightened. And that's a perfectly natural, perfectly reasonable reaction.

But we must be cautious of that fear. We must take heed. Because from the days of Pharaoh, to the days of Pontius Pilate, right up until this very moment, one of the oldest tricks in the book of the powers that be is to leverage and exploit that little bit of discomfort and fear that encountering diversity creates and use it to set us against one another.

So the next time you encounter diversity and it brings a bit of discomfort, here's an unconventional way to address it. Become aware of your belly button. Yes, I'm serious. When you encounter diversity that frightens you or makes you uncomfortable, a way to counter that fear and discomfort is to intentionally become aware of your belly button.

Whenever I see artists' renderings of the first humans as attested in Scripture, I'm always puzzled if they depict them with belly buttons. If they were made by God from dust and bone, why would they have a belly button?

But you have one. And I have one. And so does the person who you love most in this world. And so does the person who drives you the most crazy in this world. Because to be human is to have a belly button. Your belly button is a visible and tangible reminder that you were once literally physically attached to another human being. It's a reminder that you were created by God as bone from bone, flesh from flesh. Your belly button is a reminder that no matter how much you've grown, no matter how important you've become, you would not exist apart from other human beings.

And so the next time you encounter diversity that makes you uncomfortable or fearful, become aware of your belly button, and then contemplate the belly button of the other. Maybe it's an innie. Maybe it's an outie. Maybe it's a hybrid.

I've found it hard to be fearful or uncomfortable around someone else when wondering about their belly button. I've found that contemplating such a silly thing as a belly button makes me contemplate that they, too, are made from flesh, and bone. Though they may think, vote, pray, love, and worship differently, nevertheless, they, too, were created bone from bone, flesh from flesh, in the image of God.

## V

We were created by a good and generous God and intentionally placed in relationship with one another. As the church, as the people of God called forth by Jesus Christ, we have been called to model what that looks like to the City of Athens and the world beyond. But that's hard, holy work. The world in which we live seems bent on drawing lines and build walls and fragmenting into ever-smaller pieces. Much of the world in which we live seems to view diversity as a threat, rather than as something that God has lovingly woven into the very fabric of the created order.

So we would do well to remember that the most common imperative phrase in Scripture, the most frequent commandment, if you will, is "Do not be afraid."

We would do well to heed the words of a wise Georgia preacher who once wrote, "We cannot long survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together."<sup>1</sup> "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."<sup>2</sup> We would do well to remember that the very first words ever spoken by a human being remind us that we are all in this thing together, because this at last is bone of our bones, and flesh of our flesh.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "On Being a Good Neighbor," in *Strength to Love*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981, 38.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 16 Apr 1963, [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html), accessed September 6, 2019.