

**God's Story, Our Story:
A Dash Through the Bible**

by

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Introduction

One Sunday afternoon a couple of years into my first pastorate several members of the congregation were conversing prior to the start of our monthly board meeting. The board chair looked at me and asked, “Larry, who came first in the Bible, Jesus or Moses?” The query made me aware that while many church folk know a lot of biblical stories, few of them have a grasp of how those stories fit together into some sort of coherent biblical mega-story. They perhaps have even less understanding of how that biblical story relates to and intersects with the whole human story as well as their own life-story. This grand biblical story that flows from the creation stories of Genesis 1-2 all the way to John’s visions of a new heaven and new earth, and a new city in Revelation 21-22 is “the story we find ourselves in” (to borrow the title of a Brian McLaren book, *Jossey-Bass*, 2003). This incredible saga is God’s story, but also our story; God’s story and our story interwoven as one story, a narrative continuing in our lives and churches right now in 2010. It’s a story that reveals our identity, mirrors our foibles, declares our worth as human beings, announces our destiny, points the way forward through life, reveals our vocation and makes known the love of God for humanity and all of creation, and proclaims in loud voice that God will, when all is said and done, have all of creation transformed into a new creation where God’s will is done on a new earth as it is done in heaven. Understanding the flow of this story helps us know what God is up to in our world and gives us the opportunity to jump on board with God’s grand plan.

I hope these writings do something else, too. I hope these readings dispel the notion of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, as inferior scripture. You will often hear persons say the Old Testament is a book of law and the New Testament a book of love. The God of the old is a heartless warrior, while the God of the new is a God of love, forgiveness and grace. Such is just plain wrong. Some of the most profound statements of God’s love are found in the pages of the Old Testament. The whole of the story is marked by God’s unfailing grace. Remember that Jesus was nurtured on the Hebrew scriptures. There he discovered the God of love. By steeping himself in those writings he formulated the teachings that are so life-giving for us—love God, love neighbor, love enemies, judge not.... The Old Testament is the foundation for the life and ministry of the Jesus and the subsequent church. Without it the New Testament makes no sense.

The following writings were originally done as a thirteen sermon series in 1998 at the Christian Church of Woodland. They were revised and preached again in 2008, again in Woodland. Following the series in 2008, I sensed something was missing; the series felt somewhat incomplete. I wasn’t sure I had been clear about the nature of the blessing that was to come to all the nations of the earth through the descendants of Abraham—so I wrote a sermon on blessing. I also had the sneaking suspicion that I hadn’t answered the question “So what?” I’d told the whole story but what difference does it make; what does it mean for how we live now? So I wrote a sermon entitled “How Should We Then Live?” If this story is true, how should we then live our lives now in 2010? I also felt I hadn’t said enough about where the story is heading, so I added a sixteenth sermon to the series entitled “What Shall It All Be?”

I have read through all of these sermons, weeded out some of material that was specific for the church in Woodland, and turned each sermon into a chapter. The first chapter is a dash through the whole biblical story beginning with God’s three promises to Abraham. The second chapter backs up and attempts to tell why it was necessary for those three promises to be given in the first place. The next eleven chapters delve into each section of the story in greater detail. The last three chapters, as previously stated, attempt to get at the meaning of the story. I hope you enjoy this “dash through the Bible,” this story we find ourselves in.

God's Story, Our Story—A Dash Through the Bible
Chapter One
“The Hound of Heaven”
Genesis 11:27—12:3; Psalm 105:1-15, 23-27, 43-45

We begin with Abraham and Sarah, actually with Abram and Sarai, for those are their names when we first meet them in the story. We begin here in part because these are the first biblical characters we can date with much accuracy, but more important, because with Abram and Sarai God begins working out in history a specific plan to reverse the damage human beings have done to themselves and the rest of creation. With these two God sets in motion a rescue operation, a plan that will lead to blessing for all of the peoples of the earth, a plan to bring to every person, tribe and nation the good, the beauty God intends for each. It's even a plan for the healing of all creation.

Abram was born, grew up, and married Sarai in Ur of the Chaldeas, a city located in what is now the modern nation of Iraq. He and Sarai traveled with his father, Terah, out of Ur, up and around the Fertile Crescent to Haran. There they settled. Following the death of Terah, God spoke to Abram telling him to leave that place and travel to a land that God would show him. God then promised Abram three things: descendants, a land for those descendants to live in, and the promise that through Abram and his descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed. We would not be too far off to say that all the rest of the biblical story, actually, all the rest of human history, is the story of how God fulfills those three promises to Abram and Sarai.

The first promise is not fulfilled easily because Sarai is unable to have children and has aged well beyond normal childbearing years. God, however, reiterates the promise, even changing the couple's names to Abraham and Sarah. The name, Abraham, means “father of a multitude.” Finally when it all seems hopeless, Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah. The first promise is well on its way to fulfillment. Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, become the parents of twins, bouncing baby boys. (They literally bounce around in the womb so much that Rebekah actually wishes she could die to escape the discomfort). Esau is the eldest, Jacob the younger. Jacob's name means “supplanter,” one who takes the place of another. Jacob had no trouble living into his name. He swindles Esau out of his birthright and then proceeds to deceive his father into giving him the blessing due Esau, the firstborn. Later, in a wrestling match with God, Jacob's name is changed to Israel. From Jacob, aka, Israel, come the people of Israel. Jacob becomes the father of twelve sons and one daughter. These twelve sons become the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons is Joseph, the dreamer. Most of his brothers don't like him because, first, he's their father's favorite, and second, his dreams usually entail his older brothers bowing down to him. The brothers, in an act of jealousy, sell Joseph to traders heading to Egypt. He's sold as a slave to an official named Potiphar. He's imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit, but in time is able to interpret a dream for Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. The dream predicts seven years of bumper crops followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh commutes Joseph's prison sentence and puts him in

charge of saving up food during the years of abundance so there will be enough in the years of famine. Joseph becomes the number two man in all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. When the years of famine hit, who starts getting hungry and eventually comes scurrying to Egypt for food but none other than Joseph's jealous brothers. They fail to recognize their brother all decked out as he is in his vice-pharaoh outfit. After toying with them for several months, making them squirm a bit, Joseph reveals his identity and invites the whole clan including his father Jacob to come live in Egypt. Thus they escape the famine, surviving a serious threat to the promise, keeping God's plan on track.

Through the next several centuries, the people of Israel prosper and multiply in Egypt. But then a pharaoh takes the throne who has forgotten about Joseph. Threatened by the presence of these so called Israelites, he enslaves them forcing them to work on his massive building projects. Seeing the people's suffering and being mindful of the covenant made with Abraham, the promise given, God calls a reluctant Moses to lead the people out of Egypt and on to the land that God had promised to them. Pharaoh, however, is reluctant to let this people go, but finally has had enough of Moses and of the plagues that accompany him. Set free by pharaoh's edict, the Israelites cross the Red Sea and travel down the Sinai Peninsula...grumbling all the way that they had much better cuisine back in Egypt. They come to Mount Sinai where Yahweh (the name God revealed to Moses) makes a covenant with the people promising to be their God, their keeper, their savior, if they would be God's people worshiping only Yahweh. The people agree. God gives them the Ten Commandments and other guidelines spelling out how a people in covenant with God ought to live. Moses then leads the people north to the border of Canaan, the land God promised to Abraham saying that his descendants would live here. The people are afraid to enter the land after hearing reports from ten spies who say the warriors are huge, their cities invincible. The spies recommend 10 to 2 to reverse course. The people agree. Displeased, God sends them for a forty year time-out wandering in the wilderness. When the forty years have passed, the people work their way up the east side of Canaan to the eastern bank of the Jordan River. There Moses dies and Joshua succeeds him as leader of God's people. Joshua leads them across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. They fight the battle of Jericho, conquer other cities and settle into the land. The land is divided among the twelve tribes, with each family in each tribe receiving a plot of land that would be their heritage, a guaranteed source of their livelihood down through the generations. Joshua then gathers the people at a place called Shechem and leads them in a covenant renewal ceremony challenging the people, "Choose this day whom you will serve....As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." The people reaffirm their covenant as the people of God. The second promise to Abraham, a land for his descendants, is fulfilled.

After the death of Joshua there follows an especially difficult period in the history of Israel. You might call it the "Dark Ages" of Israel's history—the time of the judges. The people again and again turn away from God, ignore God, fail to worship God, but then when some threat arises, an invasion by the Philistines or some other neighboring tribe, they cry out to God for help. God delivers them by raising up leaders, they are called judges, to deliver the people. The pattern repeats itself some twenty times in the

book of Judges as people like Deborah, Gideon, Samson and Jephthah are used as God's instruments to rescue and preserve Israel...and keep the promises on track in a dangerous time.

The last of the judges, and one sometimes called the first of the prophets, is Samuel. Like Abraham and Moses, Samuel is a key figure in the biblical story. He helps stabilize the nation during a tricky time of transition. Unlike many of the other judges, Samuel is not a military leader. He's more of a prophet/priest kind of a guy, one who calls the people to remain faithful to God. During his time of leadership the people beg him to anoint a king for them. Samuel counters that God is their ruler, but the people demand a flesh and blood human king. Samuel, with God's permission, grants their request. After warning them that kings can be arrogant, selfish and oppressive, Samuel anoints Saul as the first king of Israel. When Saul fails miserably in that role, Samuel, even while Saul still lives, secretly anoints David, the youngest son of Jesse, as the next king of Israel.

After Saul dies battling the Philistines, David ascends to the throne, and soon makes Jerusalem his capital city. God now not only tolerates the king idea, but decides to make the monarchy a part of the plan to bless all the peoples of the earth. God initiates a covenant with David promising that David's dynasty would be established permanently, that is, one of his descendants would reign forever. At David's death, after considerable palace intrigue, Solomon, one of David's sons, becomes king. The kingdom thrives under his rule. Solomon oversees extensive building projects including the construction of the first temple in Jerusalem. At Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam becomes king. Rehoboam doesn't deal well with some malcontents in his kingdom resulting in a rebellion and the secession of the ten northern tribes. The nation of Israel is split: the ten tribes in the north are known as Israel; the southern two tribes as Judah. The descendants of David reign over Judah with their capital in Jerusalem. In 722 B.C. the northern kingdom of Israel is conquered by the Assyrians and ceases to exist. Some 140 years later, the southern kingdom of Judah fails to heed the warnings of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, calls to repent, to turn back toward God and trust God with their well being. Refusing to heed the prophetic voice, Judah is conquered in 586 B.C. by the world's current superpower, Babylon. Jerusalem is destroyed, the temple built by Solomon is ransacked and leveled. All of the upper class and skilled persons along with their families are carried away into exile in Babylon.

The Jewish people are devastated. The presence of the temple, the presence of God in the temple was supposed to keep them safe. Jerusalem was supposed to be a God-protected city, invincible. In spite of their overwhelming despair, this time of exile proves to be fertile ground, playing a key role shaping the life and thought of the Jewish people. Here much of their scripture took its final shape. The people discovered that their God was much bigger than they thought; God was not just ruler of the small territory of Israel, but of the whole earth, even all creation. Two prophets especially, Ezekiel and the one we call Second Isaiah, were instrumental in restoring hope and leading the people back toward God.

Within fifty years of the beginning of their exile, a man named Cyrus, ruler of the Medes and Persians, conquers Babylon and subsequently issues a decree that any Jews who wish are free to return to Jerusalem. Some do. Many have carved out a new life in their land of exile and choose to remain in Babylon. Those who do return, attempt to rebuild Jerusalem, but find life very discouraging and difficult. One hundred years later, Nehemiah leads another group back to Jerusalem and furthers the rebuilding. Some ten years later, a priest named Ezra leads another contingent back to the homeland, oversees the rebuilding the temple and institutes a major religious reform, which though harsh in some respects, helps preserve the Jewish people and their faith. Some of Ezra's strict edicts about prohibiting inter-mingling with Gentiles are counterbalanced by the message of books like Jonah and Ruth which witness to God's inclusion of Gentiles.

Though back from exile, Israel's life continues to be rocky and unsettled. Alexander the Great conquers Palestine adding it to his vast empire and introducing Greek culture...some of which is highly offensive to the Jews. After Alexander's death, his kingdom is divided between four of his generals. Two of them, Ptolemy and Antiochus (and their descendants), fight over the territory of Israel. The dust scarcely settles before the ruler Antiochus IV decides to try to stamp out the Jewish religion. The Jews fight back under the leadership of Judas Maccabeus. Israel regains religious freedom and then, some years later, even achieves some eighty years of political freedom. Unable to handle that gift, in 67 B.C.E., as two rival Jewish leaders jostle for the throne, the Romans, under General Pompey, sweep in taking control of Israel. In 47 B.C.E. Mark Antony appoints Herod, a Jew, as something of a puppet king. Fifty three years later the Romans have had enough of Herod and his kin and make the land a Roman province. They assign a Roman procurator to administer it. Pilate is the best known of those Roman governors.

Of course, in the midst of the reign of the tyrant Herod, two boys are born, one named John, the other Jesus. In them the final promise of God to Abraham, blessing for the whole world takes a quantum leap forward as God now speaks to the world through a son. The boys grow up. John, known as the Baptist, begins preaching, preparing the way for a new work of God. Jesus is baptized and begins an itinerant ministry through Galilee, Judea, Samaria and even at times ventures into Gentile (non-Jewish) territory. He gathers disciples, teaches, preaches, heals, and welcomes sinners and outcasts to his table. Jesus confronts the oppressive, life-robbing ways of some of the religious leaders, the whole manipulative religious system centered in the temple, and the heavy-handed ways of the Roman overlords. In his words and actions he declares that God is beginning to reign in this world as never before. God's kingdom is now taking root in Palestine; God's will is being done on earth as it is in heaven, the very life of heaven is pouring forth into the world and things are going to change. This itinerant rabbi incurs the wrath of the establishment elite, is arrested on a visit to Jerusalem, tried before Jewish leaders and the Roman governor, Pilate, sentenced to death, crucified and buried. Three days later God reverses the actions of the powers that be and raises Jesus from the tomb. Jesus appears to his disciples over a period of forty days. He then commissions them to go into all the world preaching the good news of God's reign present here and now. Jesus then

disappears from their sight after promising that he is with them always, even to the close of the age.

The disciples wait in Jerusalem as Jesus instructed. During the festival of Pentecost when Jews from all over the world are assembled, the Holy Spirit comes with power upon 120 of Jesus' followers as they pray together. They spill out into the streets of Jerusalem and into the temple area telling everyone about Jesus the messiah, the anointed of God. Peter stands and preaches to a massive crowd. Three thousand join the movement and are baptized in a single day. The first 12 chapters of the book of Acts tell the story of the early growth of the church from Jerusalem to Judea and on out into Samaria in ever widening circles, even reaching into Gentile territory. Peter is the focus of these early chapters. Acts chapters 13-28 tell of the missionary work of Paul, persecutor turned preacher, who carries the story of God's grace given in Jesus to major parts of the Roman Empire ending finally in Rome with Paul under house arrest, but free to preach and teach. He does so with great energy "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

And that in a nutshell, albeit a very big nutshell, is the story. It's the story of a humanity whose chief purpose for existing is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. But it's also the story of a humanity stubbornly resisting its call, spending a great deal of time and energy running from its glorious destiny, trying to keep away from the God who desires only to bless it. Most of all it's the story of a God who is not deterred by these runaway human beings. No matter how far they run, no matter how much they resist their destiny, and even when they choose other gods that are easier to worship, God still loves them and will not let them go. It's the story of the hound of heaven. In love God stays on the track of these human beings refusing to give up, tenaciously pursuing, even circling around to the front to put love and grace in the path seeking to draw all of us to our destiny living as beloved children of God, glorifying and enjoying God, loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

God's Story, Our Story—A Dash Through the Bible
 Chapter Two
 “The Beauty and the Beast”
 Genesis 1:1-31; 3:1-13

God called Abraham and Sarah and told them to leave the land in which they were living to go to a land that God would show them. God promised them three things: descendants, a land for those descendants and that through those descendants all the earth would somehow be blessed. The rest of the biblical story is the account of how those promises are fulfilled. But why does God call Abraham? Why does God make these promises? Why does God begin with Abraham a plan to bless the whole world? The answers are in the front of the book...in the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

Genesis begins with two completely different stories of creation. These accounts were written a couple of thousand years before modern science developed, so they were never intended to be a scientific account of how the world actually came into existence. Some segments of the church spend way too much time trying to defend these accounts against the theory of evolution...and in the process miss the point, miss the richness, miss the theological bounty in these stories. I like Brian McLaren's approach, “Evolution is one of God's coolest creations.” These first two chapters of Genesis aren't there to give us ammunition in a war with science. Rather, these are God inspired stories filled with important and profound insights about God, human beings, this earth and the whole of the universe. Chief among those insights is the truth that everything that exists was created by God, created good, created delightful.

The first creation story in chapter one tells of six days of creation followed by a seventh day of rest. God takes the watery chaos, that churning, dark sea where nothing can live and turns it into a beautiful creation which sustains life in bountiful fashion. The first day God creates light and darkness, day and night and declares it good, delightful. The second day God creates the sky, the atmosphere necessary for life. The third day features the creation of dry land, plants and trees, and again God sees it is good, delightful. On the fourth day come sun, moon and stars, also pronounced good. (It's interesting that sun, moon and stars, what we know to be the source of light are created three days after light...probably to make a strong statement that these lights often worshiped as gods are not gods, but part of creation.) Day five brings fish and sea monsters in the waters and birds in the air. God blesses those creatures, urges them to multiply and once again takes delight in the beauty of creation. And then on day six the land animals are fashioned: cattle, creeping things and wild beasts. God smiles at the goodness of it all, but the day is not yet done. This is a big day. God creates another creature, a creature with a twist, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion.... So God created humankind...male and female he created them.” And now it's all done and God saw that it was all good, delightful. No...no, no, no, that's not what God saw. That's not what the Bible says. It says that God saw everything and saw that it was very good, super, wonderfully delightful. One of the very important affirmations God is making here is that this earth is good. Some philosophies, some worldviews say that the material, physical parts of this universe,

including human bodies, are evil, neutral at best. The spiritual part is good, but not the material/physical part; it hinders, holds back, even corrupts the spiritual. That idea, however, does not come from Genesis chapter one. God says that everything from dirt to grass to giraffes to human intelligence and human sexuality is made by God and is good, even delightful. Life here is intended to be good, a delight. It may at times be difficult, with way too much suffering, but it is still first and foremost God's creation, God's gift. It is good. That's how God created it. (By the way, that God created this world good and delights in it is all the reason we need to be environmentalists, persons fully committed to the health and well-being of this God-created earth and every God-created critter on it.)

This chapter also declares the great dignity and worth of us human beings. Notice that after each new part of creation God sees that it is good. But after the human beings, made in the image of God, are added to the mix, it is now very good. Human beings are the crowning touch on God's grand glorious creation. Without the human beings it just would not be complete. We human beings are not worms. We are made by God...in God's own image. We are of great value. Psalm 8 echoes Genesis one. Speaking of us human beings the psalmist sings, "You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." You ever slouch along through life thinking you're a worm, nothing? Have you ever felt worthless, inferior? Here's ample reason to stand up a little straighter; you are made by God, in the very image of God, and the old saying is true, "God don't make no junk."

The second account of creation found in Genesis chapter two makes a similar point. There God makes a man and then proceeds to fashion everything else for him, lavishes all the goodness of creation on the human. God makes a beautiful garden for the man and in it causes to grow every luscious fruit tree you can imagine. All the animals are made as companions for the man. Finally God creates the best gift, another human being. These human creatures are so precious to God that no effort is spared to supply their needs and to bring them joy. God creates life good and the human beings are intended to live it with gusto.

The addition of the other human, the companion, the partner, the woman, says something else very important about us human beings. God created us social creatures, created us to be together, to live in loving, joy-filled, caring relationships with one another. We were never meant to live as solitary creatures. Our lives, our well-being are all wrapped up with one another. And I'm not just talking about the male, female, marriage thing. We are created for life together...whether or not we ever marry. We are meant for relationships. We are our brother's, our sister's keepers. We will not truly live, we will not ever find fulfillment in life apart from healthy, caring relationships with other human beings.

These creation stories are also very clear about another thing: human beings are completely dependent upon God. God makes them and supplies everything they need. Every good and needful thing is provided by the Creator. They cannot even live without the breath that God blows into their nostrils. We humans are made by God, are made for God, for relationship with God, to walk with God in the cool of the garden. We are made

dependent upon God. We cannot live fully without God, without glorifying and enjoying God.

God created. God created something good, delightful. God created beauty.

But that's only half of the story of these first eleven chapters of Genesis. These human beings made for companionship with each other, made for life with God, are nevertheless given the ability, the freedom to choose whether or not to live in relationship with God and one another. Unfortunately the first human beings set the tone for all of the other human beings who will follow them; they chose to run away, to insist they can make more of their life without God's help.

Genesis chapter three is the story of these human beings, created gloriously in the image of God, dependent on the love and gracious provision of God, but wanting to be independent, to break free of that dependence upon God, to make themselves the center. The basic temptation urged by the serpent is that the human beings break free, live by their own resources, escape their need for God and determine their own destiny apart from God. It's the choice to make do without God, actually a choice to take God's place. The snake is basically saying, "Make yourself the center of your universe. Live for you. Worship yourself. It's the only way you'll discover all the things God is holding back from you." And so the man and woman shoved away from God. They, like every human being since, decide to throw off their dependence on their Creator. As Paul and Elizabeth Achtemeier put it, "Eve's temptation is to rely on herself rather than on God. She will be the master of her own fate, the determiner of her own destiny." (Achtemeier, Paul J. and Elizabeth, The Old Testament Roots of Our Faith, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 1962, page 29) Taking that step she and Adam disrupt not only their relationship with God, but wreak havoc with every other relationship that matters.

As soon as they push God away, just as soon as they set themselves at the center, they find life disrupted at every level. Their relationship with God is thrown out of kilter as seen by their attempt to hide from the presence of Yahweh moving through the garden. This does not bode well for humanity because this is the key relationship. Saint Augustine began his confessions with this prayer, "O Lord, thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." No human can find peace outside this relationship which is at the very core of our being. It's this relationship that makes us truly human, and whether we can name it or not, our hunger for God is the basic yearning within our heart and mind.

This disruption of this most basic relationship, however, is only the beginning as other aspects of life crumble around them. Immediately after declaring independence, deciding to make themselves the center, something slips off center inside themselves and they become uncomfortable in their own skin. At the same moment they find their relationship with one another askew. They become self-conscious in one another's presence, aware of their nakedness and feel compelled to cover themselves. A wedge has been driven between them; they no longer feel completely comfortable in each other's company. A second sign of their broken relationship is their readiness to blame someone

else for their own action. Adam blames both Eve and God, “the woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit....” Eve in turns passes blame onto the serpent. In a third tragic sign the mutual partnership between man and woman envisioned in the creation stories is disrupted as the male now “rules” over the female. It’s not a part of God’s original intention, but with the sin the relationship becomes unbalanced with the male wielding the power. (Just a quick side note to say that in Jesus Christ this consequence of the fall is reversed and it is now time for men and woman to return to the equal, mutual partnership that God intended in creation.)

A third relationship goes awry. The humans find a wedge between themselves and the earth. What needed only “tending” to bring forth an abundance of food, now requires tedious, back-breaking labor to eke out a meager living. The man now struggles against the earth. Thorns and thistles and ground fight against him so that “by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground....”

Life is broken. What’s interesting is this isn’t just an ancient story; it’s very modern. The story of Adam and Eve and broken life is the story of every one of us. As Old Testament scholar Bernard Anderson writes,

[This story] is a profound description of the human situation in any historical time. Surely there is in human experience a melancholy awareness that life is not what it ought to be, that somehow or somewhere human beings have lost the “peace” (wholeness, well-being) and the humanness that the Creator intended. Conflict, anxiety, insecurity, exploitation, injustice, suffering, guilt—these are not intended to be normal, even though they are life’s daily realities. Why is this? The temptation to be independent or even to be like God (Genesis 3:5), that is, to live life in our own way and on our own terms, leads to estrangement at all levels: from God, from others, and from the earth itself.

But we haven’t finished the “legends of the fall,” the stories in Genesis chapters 4-11. Here we see the brokenness between human beings escalating. The seemingly minor wedge driven between Adam and Eve, straining their relationship, becomes an ever widening gulf between people in subsequent generations. The couple’s first son, Cain, his relationship with God out of sync, commits, in a fit of jealousy, the ultimate act of human brokenness by murdering his brother, Abel. When God asks Cain where his brother is, we hear a hauntingly familiar and very modern sounding response, “Am I my brother’s keeper? Am I responsible for someone else’s well-being? I don’t think so.” Instead of living in caring community the human beings grow in their ability to break that community. Cain’s great-great-great grandson, Lamech, slaughters a young man for some minor offense and then sings to his wives about how he is avenged seventy-seven fold. (Genesis 4:23-24)

From there on the violence grows until finally it is too much, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thought of their hearts was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5) Human community has completely broken down. People are far from what God intended them to be and growing even further away by the day. They become less and less human and humane.

