

It is good to be back at Fairfield. My mini-sabbatical was very productive. **I outlined my next book, wrote two chapters, attended a family reunion, went camping with Joan and the boys, and made my annual pilgrimage to Vincennes to visit my relatives, most of whom are now in cemeteries, but I like to imagine they're looking down from heaven and appreciating my yearly tribute.** My father's family were Baptist, my mother's family Catholic, so they're in different cemeteries in Vincennes, both on Willow Street, though divided by a road, and a large statue of Jesus, with upraised arms, like a referee in a boxing match, separating the antagonists. **I imagine them together in heaven, surprised that the other is there.**

I visited my Aunt Doris, who told me stories about my great-grandmother, whom I never met and know only through stories, through the recollections of others. **There are some people we only know through stories.** I was talking with the little boy next door about George Washington and he mentioned that George Washington was honest. I asked him how he knew that and he told me the story of George Washington confessing to his father about cutting down the cherry tree. **I didn't have the heart to tell him that story about honesty wasn't true.**

There are two kinds of stories we tell. There are stories we tell about others, like the George Washington story and the stories about my great-grandmother. **And there are stories we tell about ourselves.** I like to think of myself as a great romantic, so whenever I get the chance, I tell people about riding my bicycle from Plainfield to Paoli to see Joan. **Every time I tell it, the distance from Plainfield to Paoli grows longer.** I think they're about 300 miles apart now.

Some of the stories we tell about ourselves are good, helpful stories. They give us a sense of pride, or emphasize one of our more positive traits. These are the stories we hope get told at our funerals. **But some of the stories we tell about ourselves are hurtful, dredging up painful memories or less than honorable moments.** There are some stories about ourselves we'd just as soon forget.

We have to be careful about the stories we tell and the stories we believe, because stories have great power and can form lasting impressions, some of which simply aren't true.

The Bible tells stories about us. It doesn't use our names. **They're non-specific stories, but these stories claim to be true about all people.** One of these stories is the story of Adam and Eve.

We all know that story. The first couple are placed in a beautiful garden, invited to enjoy its pleasures, and given only one prohibition—not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Which, of course, they do. **If they hadn't, there wouldn't have been a story, because a story always requires tension.** But the teller of that story, based on the conduct of two mythical people, drew a universal conclusion about all people—that men and women are inherently disobedient, morally lax, and sinful. **It is a pessimistic view of human nature, causing us to see the bad in others and not the good.** The early Quakers thought it was hogwash and chose instead to tell an alternative story, that the Light and Goodness of God was in every person.

I was well into my adult years before it was pointed out to me that there are two creation stories in the Bible. **I'd read each story numerous times, but had assumed they were slightly different versions of the same story, a little different in tone but essentially consistent.** But that isn't the case. The first creation story is the God-created-the-world-in-seven-days story. It's found in the first chapter of Genesis. On the first day, God created light. That's a good place to start. It helped God see what she was doing. **On the second day, God created earth and heaven.** So the first thing God did after creating light, was build himself a place to live.

The third day, God separated land from water and created vegetation—good vegetation like flowers and sweet corn and bad vegetation

like kudzu and poison ivy. The fourth day, God created the sun and moon and stars. **Since God created light on the first day, I'm not sure how God did that without creating the sun, but another good element of story is mystery, so let's not look at this too closely.** On the fifth day, God made birds and fishes. Then on the sixth day, decided someone needed to catch the fish, so God created Frank Gladden. And you and I and George Washington and my great-grandmother. God created people.

Now here's where the creation stories differ most dramatically. The second creation story, the story of Adam and Eve, tells us we're inherently disobedient, morally lax, and sinful. **But the other creation story, the first creation story in the Bible, says God created us in the divine image, that God looked at men and women and said, "This is good stuff. I outdid myself today."**

One creation story is about human failure, the other story about human worth. One story emphasizes rejection, the other story relationship. **One story is about brokenness, the other story about potential and possibility.** One story portrays fault and failure, the other story acceptance and approval.

Both stories are in the Bible, but they are radically different stories. Historically, the Church has emphasized the Adam and Eve story, claiming it

was the authoritative account of our origin and nature. The problem with the Adam and Eve story is the problem of collective guilt. **Adam and Eve sinned, so everyone who follows them is a sinner.** That's an odd conclusion. I was riding my bicycle this past Tuesday and a dog bit me. Came right out of a yard and bit me on the leg. **But not all dogs bite me.** I came home and my dog was nice to me.

So the Adam and Eve story makes an exaggerated assumption. If the first people disappointed God, then everyone must disappoint God. Since Adam and Eve broke their word, then everyone must break their word. **I would suggest that believing the worst about ourselves is not an appropriate starting point for healthy religion.** This is why we have to be careful about the stories we tell and the stories we believe, because stories have great power and can form lasting impressions, some of which simply aren't true.

Last month, I was speaking with a woman whose husband was overbearing and self-centered. She was a person of faith, had been taught early in her life the story of Adam and Eve, so believed that while her husband was inconsiderate, it was her Christian duty to obey him. **"After all," she told me, "God created Eve to be Adam's helpmate."**

“Ah, but there’s another Bible story you might read,” I told her. “In that story, God created women not from a man’s rib to be a servant, but created the woman simultaneously to the man to be his equal.”

She was fascinated by that story. “Our pastor never pointed that out,” she told me.

Well, imagine that.

What story do you believe about yourself? Do you consider yourself a child of Adam, destined to fail, destined to disappoint God and others? Or do you remember you are made in the image of God? Do you remember that God looked at you and said, “I did a fine job when I created her! I was at the top of my game when I made him!”

What story do you tell about yourself?