

The Continuing Adventure of Faith

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This issue of *Perspectives* is radical; it goes to the root of God's creative purpose and redeeming grace; it goes to the root of the human condition and its healing. Dealing with matters of such fundamental import on which the tradition of the church has so long been codified, it is not easy to gain a fresh perspective. The very spectacles through which we read the biblical story already delimit what we will find there. It is difficult for the story itself to speak its own truth over the resounding force of confessional dogma that has reduced the story to a set of theological propositions.

One of the exciting developments in contemporary theological discussion and in preaching is the recovery of narrative. As background for this issue we can do no better than to revisit Genesis 1-3.

In my own development, I began reading the Genesis stories as literal accounts of historical events. Even beyond my early years in Sunday school, there remained for me seven twenty-four-hour days, a human couple, Adam and Eve, a garden, a tree, and a snake. I remember the sense of threat I felt at the suggestion that Genesis 1 and 2 were two separate creation stories, neither authored by Moses, deriving from different periods of Israel's history, neither of which ought to be understood as narration of actual history.

Finally, my defenses were worn down and I yielded to what now seems so obvious. The explosion of knowledge in the respective sciences combined with a recognition of the mythological character of the passages. As symbolic stories, those chapters became powerful purveyors of truth about God, the world, and human destiny. Richness of meaning grew in proportion to my release of a literalistic interpretation.

Then I encountered Walter Brueggemann's *Commentary on Genesis*. Brueggemann tells me there is no legitimate way I can separate Genesis 2 and 3 because there is an obvious dramatic cohesion between them. Further, Brueggemann challenged my easy accommodation to two parallel creation

accounts offering complementary perspectives on God's creative action. Genesis 1—2:4a, the later writing, gives the grand cosmic scope of God's work in fine liturgical form. Genesis 2:4b—3:24 focuses on human persons as the glory and the central problem of creation.

No longer can I isolate chapter three, reading it as the story of the Fall appended to two creation accounts. Brueggemann calls me up short with his claim.

The text is commonly treated as the account of "*the fall*." Nothing could be more remote from the narrative itself. This is one story which needs to be set alongside many others in the Old Testament. In general, the Old Testament does not assume such a "fall." Deuteronomy 30:11-14 is more characteristic in its assumption that humankind can indeed obey the purposes of God. (p. 41)

Brueggemann, the biblical exegete, disallows my tendency as a theologian to turn story into dogma, to create here an ideological lens through which to view humankind and thereby to speak of the human creature as fallen. Of course, this is not to deny the proud disobedience and consequent alienation portrayed in the story. But, contends Brueggemann, there is not one "fall" story but rather, in Genesis 1-11, four "falls," four stories of invitation and refusal, all of which form the prelude to the story of God's radical grace in the creation of a people out of the barrenness of Sarah's womb (11:30).

This is not the place to debate specific points of Brueggemann's argument; I cite his discussion because he forces me to revisit familiar territory, territory so familiar that I know what it means before I read it and therefore mute its voice and short-circuit its power to address me, to confront me, to grant some new insight to me.

If only I can move beyond the feeling of threat and the consequent defensiveness that wields traditional dogma as a weapon against the advance of human learning on all fronts, it just may be that the biblical story, freed from my pre-understanding, will reveal new insight that will illumine the contemporary scene and address questions left unanswered by our traditional formulations.

The Christian pilgrimage is lived out in the tension between the valued tradition that has shaped us and the need ever and again to be liberated from the cultural, ethnic, theological prisons into which we are sentenced by our need for security and our lack of fundamental trust.

The adventure of faith goes on, and faithfulness demands that we keep seeking to discover the translation of God's radical grace into the idiom of our day. The task is not for the nervous, for those whose faith is tenuous, whose confidence is enmeshed in proof texts for a series of theological propositions that constitute a logically coherent system of thought. But if we do not engage in the serious and delightful probing of our faith and experience, we will not only fail to find

expression for the gospel for the twenty-first century, we will not even be in on the conversation.