How often do you hear these words about yourself?
*You are made in the image of God. You.*
*You are made in the image of God, holy and beloved.*

Or is the more pressing question “How often do you believe these words about yourself?”

This is our origin story; this is *everyone’s origin story.*
Everyone.
Even him, even her, even them.
For all time.
We are all made in the image of God.
Forever and ever, Amen.
In the first creation narrative, we hear God say, “very good,” when describing humankind. We hear God say, “Let us create humankind in our image...” And now, in the second creation story - a more nitty-gritty account - we hear about what this *means.* We are made in God’s image AND that comes with significant responsibility. What will we do with it? Will we eat from the Tree of Life, reflecting the boundless, creative, enduring love of God or will “we eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil - constantly misjudging and playing God and as a result mistreating our fellow creatures?”¹

I can stand up here all day and preach an origin story true and for you and yet I know that if you’ve been told a *different origin story,*
a story that does *not* celebrate your goodness, your beauty, your gifts, your dignity,
a story that tells you you are “other,” not worthy, less than, will never be enough,
this first and forever promise from God feels painfully out of reach.

When God fashioned the first human form out of soil, blowing the breath of life into nostrils, that humus, that dirt God molded was called *Adamah* - a Hebrew pun that we translate as the name “Adam.” Adam watched as God sprouted from the soil two trees - Life and the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God saw Adam was alone and proclaimed, “I shall make him a sustainer beside him.” An “ezer kenegdo” in Hebrew which is incredibly difficult to translate and therefore, prone to human interpretation and all its pitfalls. It has been said that God wanted to make a “help meet” for Adam, a

¹ McLaren, Brian. *We Make the Road by Walking,* 9.
“suitable helper.” But in Hebrew, the word for “help” comes again and again as strength and shield, as ally and advocate, not as this “merely auxiliary function” terms like “help meet” connote. Woman came as partner, as one to work alongside - that second Hebrew word “kenegdo” - because it is not good for humankind to be alone.

It is evident from our church’s origin story that the women of First Church and all its many iterations knew deep down in the bone of their bones that they were made in the image of God and that such image is not limited to a complementary “help meet” status. Now, don’t get me wrong: the women of the church consistently helped and aided in the ministry of this place. But it was not about gilding the work done by men but about giving glory to God whom they knew was equally and fundamentally woven inside them, too.

Of the ten charter members of our 1891 congregation, four were women, two of whom came on their own volition without family. In 1900, the women organized themselves as The Woman’s Home and Foreign Missionary Society which - through many transformations - is the mother organization of Presbyterian Women. In these early years of our church, women continually held fast. Under their leadership, missions and Christian Education became foundations of their shared life, a foundation we still stand on today.

In one of my favorite stories, the women of the church confronted a debt that needed to be paid. It was 1935 and they were frustrated by a lack of organization and follow-through. They gathered their personal funds together and went to the all-male board of deacons, urging them to follow suit and pay down the debt. It worked and at a special worship service, the old notes were burned on March 1, 1936.

Our records tell of stories like this over and over again. Of organizing themselves and garnering equal footing in a larger culture that deemed women - that deems women - less than. But they did not internalize it. They did not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil but from the Tree of Life. Even though they were part of a denomination that said they had no voice - they heard the voice of God above it all. This is important to remember, and I am talking to you, people my age and younger - there was a time, only sixty some odd years ago, when women had no formal voice, let alone people of color or people across the spectrum of gender identity and sexual orientation - not as deacons, not as elders, not as pastors. But this did not stop the Presbyterian Women of First Church. They organized interdenominational prayer breakfasts and wrote devotionals. They gathered in homes and prayed about issues troubling the waters of their day. They literally laid the cornerstone of our new sanctuary alongside the men and birthed traditions like our Chrismon Tree at Advent and giving Bibles to the newly baptized. They began our nursery and sustained missions local and global. They

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2 Learned from Robert Alter’s translation of the Hebrew Bible, page 14, first volume.
ran Vacation Bible School and Sunday School and Circles. They proclaimed with their very lives: We are made in the image of God. Made in the image of God who repeats with the birth of every life: we are all holy, beloved, deserving of respect and worth and dignity and equality. We are all partners in Christ’s service.

Partners called to bear the image of God and called to be responsible with what this means. Today, the Presbyterian Women are dissolving as a formal organization. This decision is the boldest and most profound expression of their origin story to date. For our founding women who were told to listen to a different origin story, women who a century ago were structurally and systematically sequestered in their collective power, this is a most radical invitation their descendants are making today - that all can bear the image of God, no matter what.

An invitation to live lives that witness to our choice to eat from the Tree of Life - of flourishing and generosity. To live lives that reflect our God-given goodness and join in them in lifting up the long-silenced voices and the oft-forgotten folk. To be the body of Christ, unique and wonderfully made individuals who choose to believe the origin story true and told here today: we are made in the image of God, equally worthy, equally loved, equally created.

Thanks be to God that the Presbyterian Women bore the image of God in all they did. Thanks be to God that we can join them on this new journey today, walking alongside them as holy and beloved partners in Christ’s service, no longer male nor female but one in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.