

Adam and Eve
from the pulpit of
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by
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Genesis 2:15-3:7, 22-24

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but 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.”

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” ¹⁹So 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. ²⁰The 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.

²¹So 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. ²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

²³Then 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.” ²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

3Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

²²Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— ²³therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

There are two creation stories in the Book of Genesis, back to back - in chapters one and two. They come from two different strands of biblical material, stories that were told and retold from generation to generation and then written down, ultimately edited, and over a long period of time affirmed by the community of ancient Israel as a testimony to their faith in One God.

As I said last week, this narrative is not intended to be scientific explanation about the beginning of the universe and the evolution of humankind; but rather the proclamation of theological truth – about the nature and character of God, and who we are, in relationship with God. Last Sunday we looked at the first creation story, an ancient hymn that praises God for the distinctive and delicate way we human creatures are bound to our Creator. Today, this biblical witness continues with another creation story that further proclaims that God is God, and we are not God. This one hinges on the limits of human knowledge. According to these opening chapters of Genesis, after the creation was teeming with life and goodness, God made Man and Woman. The name Adam commonly means Man, and is derived from a play on the Hebrew word which means as “The earth,” for God created Adam out of the earth. So Adam really means Earthling. Similarly, Eve is derived from a word which means “to breathe” or “to live”, for God breaths into humankind the breath of life.

God created Adam and Eve and gave these human creatures, gave us, four amazingly wonderful gifts. The first is the gift of life itself – life for humankind, and the whole creation of plants and animals, so that we would have everything we need to sustain our life. The second was the gift of companionship, the gift of one another, for God said, “It is not good that Adam should be alone.” The third is the gift of vocation; we are given meaningful work to do, to till the earth and to be stewards of God’s goodness, caring for the rest of creation. The vocation to name the animals is no small thing, with speech we too become creators in the image and likeness of our Creator.

Finally, the fourth gift is something we treasure and value beyond measure, and yet, it is the very gift that is hardest for us to accept. God gave the gift of freedom – freedom, that is, with certain limits. “You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it, you shall die.” In the wisdom of those ancient people of faith, who told this story, and wrote it down with quill and ink made of berries on woven papyrus, preserving it for all time, they understood there is something about human beings, that we cannot accept being told, “You can go this far, and no further.” For if there is a limit imposed, there is a limit to be challenged. You have to admit that if God had to come up with a limit, then calling it the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” was pretty crafty – even for God. Who on earth could resist *that* fruit?

Here again, these ancient people of God were very careful in the choice of each word, in order to convey a theological truth. It is helpful to unpack the meaning of the name of this tree. “Good and evil” is an idiomatic expression that means more than the definitions of these individual words put together. When the phrase is used in other places, it specifies “those who are too young to decide for themselves what serves their own best interests.” So this Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil stands not only in the middle of the garden, but also at the center of our creaturely nature. To eat of this tree means, we think we know what serves our best interests. To eat of this tree means - we want to be autonomous and independent - free of God’s will for our life. It means we are not inclined to look for God to help determine our best interests; we would rather decide for ourselves how to live. When Eve and Adam eat the fruit of this tree, the first and only rule God gives is broken; the first consequences of human freedom, freely exercised, are experienced; and human shame is felt for the first time.

So, where is the good news in this ancient story, so foundational we teach it to our youngest children? The Christian tradition has tended to tell the story of Adam and Eve with an emphasis upon prohibition and transgression, calling it by its familiar name, “The Fall.” However, there is

nothing in the text that talks about falling. There have always been counter traditions that see it primarily as a story of gift and blessing. As my friend and Old Testament professor Sib Towner used to say, “If there was a so-called *Fall*, then it was a fall upward – a fall into greater maturity with more responsibility. He goes on to say that the primary task of the human creature is to hold these gifts: of life and companionship, of vocation and human freedom, together, in creative tension. It is in that tension that we recognize how human freedom does have consequences. Any misuse of that freedom risks injuring another, or the creation itself, and thus misuse of freedom by some denies others their own life or God-given freedom.

Annie Dillard captures this tension when she reflects on our vocation as stewards of the creation. She writes: “We are created people. We are permitted to have dealings with the Creator, and we must speak up for the Creation. It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate grove and change your mind. The very holy mountains are keeping mum. Did the wind used to cry, and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of the earth, and living things say very little to very few. At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world: Now I am ready, Now I will stop and be wholly attentive.”¹

I believe this ancient story is preserved in our religious tradition as a way of calling us to be attentive. To be attentive to who God is, And, to who we are, in relationship with God, the God who alone gives us life and companionship, a vocation and freedom. If we hold these God-given gifts together, then the goodness God intends for all of creation is held together. When we do not, we fall short of who God has called us to be.

So here is what I find most intriguing about this story. The text says that if Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden tree, they will die. They do eat, but what happens? Does God make them die, as promised? NO! This is

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.

where the serpent has slithered into the story to complicate things. Here again, this is also where the Christian tradition has read more into the story than is actually there by creating of this snake a weird sort of personification of evil. He's just a talking serpent. Someone asked the great theologian, Karl Barth, one time, if he could believe in a story that contained a talking snake. "Dr. Barth, do you believe this snake could really talk?" Barth replied, "As to whether or not the snake could talk, I have no interest or concern. I am only interested in what the snake said."²

Did you notice what the snake said? To Eve he said, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of *any* tree in the garden?' That's not what God said. God said you shall not eat of one particular tree. As another scholar has pointed out, everything the serpent says is "kind of true."³ And God knows we human creatures are seduced to believe in endless numbers of talking heads who say things that are "kind of true." It justifies our wanting to be autonomous and independent of God. God does let Adam and Eve suffer the consequences of their behavior, but not lethal consequences. God does not kill them; rather God permits them to make clothes, mercifully shielding them from their shame at being naked in one another's presence. In a word, God covers up our shame and then calls us to greater responsibility.

As Brian McLaren has written of Adam and Eve, "God pushes them out of the nest." This is God dealing with adolescent children. "It's the classic coming-of-age story, filled with ambivalence, a childhood lost, an adulthood gained." McLaren goes on to describe how leaving the Garden begins the human journey from the hunter-gatherer era - to nomadic herders - to agriculturalists – and on to city dwellers and empire builders, all steps toward increasing maturity. But the story also cautions that each step of the socio-economic and technological ascent makes

² Karl Barth story remembered by my friend Tom Are, "First Stories: A Lot of Talk," Village Presbyterian, July 10, 2005.

³ Tom Long, *Testimony*, p. 95, also cited by Tom Are.

possible new depths of moral evil and social injustice. With new knowledge comes even greater responsibility.⁴

You see, from the very beginning, God created a highly dynamic situation in which humans have a role to play in creation, and along with our freedom and limits, the future lies open to all kinds of possibilities. But the constant among all those possibilities is the powerful presence of God, who continues to create in goodness, who desires abundant life for all, who wills life over death, and when we break the one big rule and begin to act like we ourselves are God, absolutely independent and autonomous, God goes so far as to cover up our shame. Adam and Eve eat in the Garden to remind us that we are dependent on God, we are never autonomous of the living God, and we have a job to do to care for creation.

Last Sunday I shared some reflections of the earliest astronauts who went to the moon, and how they were filled with awe at the beauty of the earth from a distance. Here is a more recent reflection from outer space. Looking down upon the earth from the International Space Station, Dan Tani said, “When I watch the Earth roll by, I realize I believe in optimism. I am an astronaut, and I cannot imagine doing what I’m doing, seeing what I’m seeing, and not being an optimist. We get to look back and see the Earth as a thing of stunning beauty. Of course, I know there are awful things going on down there, that people are in pain, wars are raging, poverty and hunger are taking far too many lives, but from here, I can only see the whole. I wish that everyone could see the world from my perspective; I believe more people would be optimistic about our future.”⁵

You know, Adam and Eve help us see not only the creation as a whole like that, but also ourselves within it. As optimists with greater responsibility, we have a God-given role to play, with freedom and

⁴ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, p. 50.

⁵ Dan Tani, “An Optimistic View of the World,” *This I Believe*, npr.org, 2/7/08.

limits, and a future that is not in our hands alone, but is cradled in the goodness of a benevolent Creator.

AMEN.