

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Lent 1
March 1, 2020

Bringing Us Home To Eden - Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

So 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 (Genesis 3:6).

Every family has its stories — how Grandmother met Grandfather, how they courted and wed. How the first house burned to the ground and all was lost; how the neighbors showed up next day with timber and nails and the home was rebuilt. How the children fought and grew; how Uncle Billy never did get married, living at home until he died an old man, as sweet and simple as the day he was born.

My brother is working on our family-tree, calling up distant relatives and filling in missing branches on the family tree. I once heard a story about someone else's family –tree. All I can find out about one guy, he said, is that he took his cow everywhere he went. People would hear a bell in the middle of the night and look out their windows to see him walking his cow in the dark"

Every family has its stories: tragedies, comedies, tall tales, and legends. Good or bad, they matter to us because they explain us somehow. They help us find our places in the history of the world — these are my people and this is how they lived—and in many cases they help us understand why we are the way we are.

Telling family stories, we rehearse the family virtues and reveal the family flaws. We discover things about ourselves as we do, and one thing in particular: that even when we think we have the stage all to ourselves and are acting on our own, there is nothing new under the sun. We are simply the most recent players in the age-old dramas of life and death that unite us to every other human being who ever walked the earth.

This first story from the book of Genesis is one of those, an ancient family story that seems to tell us some true things about ourselves and about our ambition and appetite, about our curiosity and daring, about how blindly we can make life changing decisions and how sorry we can be once we see what we have done. Most of us learned the story when we were very young as the story of the fall, about how Adam and Eve fell from the grace of eternal life in paradise to everyday hell on earth through their disobedience. The picture in the storybook Bible filled me with awe: a naked man and woman being driven by angels with flaming swords from a beautiful garden, their pitiful hands covering their shameful heads.

Few of our teachers could resist adding a moral to the story. If we did not want to suffer a similar fate, they warned us, then we had better obey our elders, who were after all God's representatives on earth. Didn't it go something like that? Or maybe you learned a slightly more sophisticated version when you were a little older, that the story of the fall is the story of how original sin came into the world.

Because Adam and Eve made the decision they did, we are somehow contaminated by our kinship with them, infected with congenital germs of evil

and death that are always waiting to break out in us if we are not very stern with ourselves, if we do not remain on our best and most holy behavior.

But neither of these readings is supported by the text itself. Nowhere in all the Bible, in fact, are the words "fall" or "original sin" ever used to refer to this story. Both of those are labels that were applied much, much later, in an effort to make sense of the story, to discover its meaning and learn its lesson so that humankind would not keep on falling forever.

But the story itself is not concerned with such things. It is not a thinly disguised piece of systematic theology. It is a story about God and about humankind, about a choice and its consequences. It is one of the family stories that tells us things about ourselves we need to know. It tells us not only how we fail — we already know that very well — but also how we survive. Because that is part of the story too, you know. Adam and Eve did not die at the end of it. They went on, but how? That is what I want to know. How did they go on after they had defied the God who was not only their maker but also their only friend? How did they fashion a future from such a short and sorry past? And how in the world did they live through the loss of paradise?

Paradise. Even for those of us who have never been there, the word conjures up green ferns, blue skies, bright water, warm breezes — peace, and plenty of it, plenty of everything, including the strong, kind presence of God. Paradise was that place where there was no fear or shame, where there was nothing to hide and nothing to hide from. It was a place where nothing had ever been

broken, where there were no chips or dents or scars, a place where everything was still whole and holy and pleasing to God.

The best way the writer of Genesis could think of to describe it was to say that paradise was the kind of place where you could walk around naked, where you could skinny-dip to your heart's content. It was that safe — so safe, in fact, that it might never even occur to you that you were naked, at least as long as you stayed away from the fruit of one particular tree.

But you know the story. Eve did not stay away. She and the serpent engaged in the first religious debate recorded in history, after which she bit into the fruit of the one particular tree and nothing was ever whole again. Paradise was lost, and there was no going back

Do you know the feeling? As in a dream, you watch your hand reach out to cradle the bright, heavy fruit, knowing you are not even hungry, knowing it is not yours to take but taking it anyhow. Your muscles are on remote control, your mind is a buzzing hive, your heart is on hold. You take, you eat, and it is very good, but before you can swallow it things have already begun to change. The light has gone dull. The wind has stopped. Your hands are sticky, and heavy as wood. You look down at them and find that you are naked— it is one of those dreams — so you try to cover yourself and then to run, but it is no use. You are stuck, rooted to the spot, exposed for anyone who passes by to see.

Actually, if it had happened that way for Adam and Eve their story might have had a different ending, but when they discover that they are naked they do manage to cover themselves and then to run away and hide, so that when the

Lord God seeks their company in the cool of the day he has to look for them. "Where are you?" God asks, and the alibis begin to fly. Adam blames God for giving him Eve, and then blames Eve for handing him the fruit, while Eve blames the serpent for tricking her. Nothing is sacred, apparently. These two are willing to sacrifice their integrity, their relationship, and their dominion over the garden in their frantic efforts to cover their nakedness, all of which gets them nowhere. Beginning with the serpent, the Lord God delivers their sentences: pain for Eve, toil for Adam, dust to dust for them both.

And of course, God was right! — Is God ever wrong? But still, what a colossal loss, what a mortal blow. You give in to one crazy, selfish desire, you look away from the light for one moment— and the car crashes, the job vanishes, the relationship ends, and there is no going back. Paradise is lost and what was, or what could have been, is gone forever. How do you survive something like that?

Well, there are a couple of ways, actually. You can, as we have seen, find someone else to blame for what has happened to you. That way you get to be angry instead of hurt and afraid, but you are also able to remain a victim.

If someone else has ruined your life, after all, then it is up to someone else to repair it, which does not leave you much to do but sit around and wait to be fixed.

On the other hand, you can blame yourself, punishing yourself in a number of different ways. You can keep track of your failures, for instance, withdrawing from life a little more with each one of them until you are afraid to come out of

hiding long enough to try anything at all. Or you can take the opposite tack, driving yourself harder and harder to make up for your losses, settling for nothing less than perfection in yourself and those around you.

You can blame paradise itself, convincing yourself that it was not so hot after all, or you can blame God, pointing out that God is the manufacturer, after all, and that if God expects us to be different then God should have made a different world in the first place. Who, for instance, made the snake?

There are legends about what happened to Adam and Eve that never made it into the Bible, whole books about them that were not respectable enough to become Holy Scripture, but stories with the ring of truth to them nonetheless. According to one of those stories, God gave Adam and Eve a cave to live in just east of Eden, where they sat in shock for months after their eviction from paradise, reciting every detail they could remember to each other: the shade of the trees, the warmth of the sun, the beauty of the land. Eve offered to kill herself if God would let Adam back into the garden alone, but Adam would not hear of it, although he tried to end his own life soon after by jumping off a cliff. When both of them had failed to die, they wept and beat their breasts and both together begged God to let them return to Eden.

But God said, with enormous divine sadness, that it was impossible — that once he had given his word even God could not take it back.

Instead he sent them angels to sing to them and sprinkle scented water on them to cool them. He reconciled the beasts of the earth to them, telling the animals to be gentle with them, but Adam and Eve could not be roused from their despair. For eighty-three days they languished, refusing all food and drink for

fear they would sin again. God gave them a fountain of living water to drink but took it back when they tried to drown themselves in it. He sent them figs from the garden to eat, big as watermelons, but they left them for the crows. Finally, the legend goes, when their bodies were stained from exposure and they were speechless with heat and cold, Adam and Eve let God teach them how to sew, using thorns for needles and sheepskins to make shirts for themselves to cover their nakedness. It was a big step. Having lost paradise, having run out of bushes and alibis to hide behind, having all but killed themselves through guilt and exposure, Adam and Eve decided to let God clothe them. "Fear not," an angel sang to them that night, "the God who created you will strengthen you."

And so, God did. Although the snake continued to plague them all their days, Adam and Eve decided to live. The days of peace and plenty were gone for good, but they got by.

Using all the scraps at hand, they managed to build first an altar and then a home, to bake bread from the wild wheat of the field and to bear five children. Using the pieces of their broken past, they made a future for themselves and for their descendants in the world outside of Eden, a world we continue to live in today. It is a world full of chips and dents and scars. Even where we have glued it back together you can still see the cracks, but in its own way it is lovely, a mosaic of many colors, a mended work of art, a testament to the God who is willing to work with broken pieces and who calls us to do the same.

That is our story, a story with everything human in it—promise, failure, blame, guilt, forgiveness, healing, hope — a story about us and a story about our God,

who did not create us just once but goes on creating us forever, putting our pieces back together so that we are never ruined, never entirely, and never for good.

Whenever the people of God gather around an altar to be fed, they do roughly the same thing. First they hear the biblical story — which is their story — and then they pray, and then someone holds up the bread — the round, whole, perfect symbol of God's presence among us. Then, at the very crescendo of the service, the person holding the bread breaks it into pieces, reminding us that our wholeness does not lie behind us but ahead of us, in the company of the Lord who made us, who feeds us and clothes us, and who dwells among us this side of Eden until he can bring us home. Amen!