

Naked and Afraid

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
September 16, 2018
Text: Genesis 3:1-13

What better place to begin our exploration of some of the stories of the Old Testament than with the one story which has undoubtedly had the most profound influence on the Western Christian culture which forms the framework of our lives each day. Yikes! That's a mouthful! What story would that be, you ask? What else could it be but the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden and their subsequent eviction therefrom. This, for sure, is a story we are confident we know from beginning to end. Even folks who were not brought up in the church know the story about the first man and the first woman whom God created and placed in the Garden of Eden to live life in eternal bliss. But then there was this snake and Eve who managed to screw it up for both of them, and everyone else who came after them for all eternity. Sound like the version of the story you know?

The thing is, though, this is not really what happened in this story at all. This understanding of the story is, in fact, an interpretation of the story which first gained real traction with the writings of St. Augustine in the 4th century as the foundation for the theological concept of original sin. Bishop Irenaeus first came up with the idea of original sin in the 2nd century but there is no

doubt that Augustine is the one who picked up the idea that humans are all tainted with the original sin of Eve who disobeyed God and ran with it. Others jumped on the original sin bandwagon, including prominent Protestant reformers like Luther and Calvin. Still today, the whole idea of original sin, and the need to find redemption from it, is a foundational concept within Christianity influencing everything from liturgy to prayer formats to translations of the Bible to hymnody and so on, and so on. All from one little story in the third chapter of Genesis.

So, how is it possible this story has had such an incredible, long lasting impact on not only Christianity, but indeed the entire world's history? It's pretty difficult to believe one little story could do so much to influence the world to that extent. But, it has and that's because this is the story often used as the reference point for when the human race went off the rails from what God originally intended for them – and it was all Eve's fault. In this line of thinking it is Eve's concupiscence or hurtful desire to eat of the forbidden fruit at the urging of the devil in the form of a snake that started a series of events that ensnared Adam and ended with God's fury at both of them for disobeying God. They were subsequently thrown out of Eden and woman was made to suffer in childbirth while man was to spend his entire life in endless toil. The snake wasn't left out of the punishment, either. It was doomed to crawl in the dust ever after. So, in this interpretation

of the story, humans getting kicked out of paradise was totally Eve's fault. Therefore, women are inherently prone to sin and must be carefully looked after by men to make sure they don't get into trouble. Sound familiar???

Only one problem with all this – that's not what the Scripture text says. First of all, sin is never mentioned in the story at all. No where is it found in the text in any translation. That means this story was not ever intended to be seen as an explanation of how sin came into the world. Instead, this is a story to explain how it was that wisdom came into the world, how it is that life is difficult and challenging, filled with hard work and challenges and disappointments. It is a story that builds the bridge from the gorgeous, blissful world of the Creation to the world in which we live today. We know we don't live in paradise, just as the early Hebrews knew they didn't live there either. This story is intended to provide an explanation of how humans moved from the pristine first moments of the newly created world to the everyday world encountered each day. It is an explanation of how wisdom entered the world and how wisdom, not sin, changed everything – even the human relationship with the divine.

We see this first in the appearance of the snake in the very beginning of the story in verse 1. No where does the text say the serpent is the devil in disguise. It does say the serpent is “crafty” or sometimes “cunning,” a description totally in keeping with the

ancient world's view of the snake as a symbol of wisdom, fertility and immortality. In other words, the snake is smart and it engages the woman in conversation when it encounters her. All it does is ask a question, "Did God say you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?" Eve answers, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but 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.'" Right there, we can see a problem. If Adam and Eve were the first humans, they would have no knowledge of death. What would it mean for God to say they would die? How could they know? They couldn't.

But, moving on, the snake then tells Eve, "you will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." You will be like God, knowing good and evil. In other words, if you eat of this fruit, you will gain knowledge. You will gain wisdom. So, Eve decides this sounds okay, and she eats the fruit. She gives some to Adam, and he eats. And suddenly "the eyes of both were opened" and they knew they were naked. Two things going on in this sentence that are very important and easy to miss. First, the phrase "the eyes of both were opened" is a description of the new reality when they both gained wisdom. Their innocence died in that moment replaced with the ability to see the world for what it was. They knew who they were as people, not merely mindless

creations of God. Second, the first thing they realized with their newfound knowledge is that they were naked. They interpreted this as inappropriate, even bad, so they immediately made some clothes from fig leaves.

Now comes my favorite part of the story. They hear God walking in the Garden and they decide to hide, presumably because they know they did something God told them not to do. Noteworthy here is that God is “walking” in the garden as though in human form and that God actually can’t find them when they are hiding. The all-knowing God can’t find two people he created hiding in a Garden he created. Hmmm... Anyhow, God calls out to the man, “where are you?” Then comes the exchange between the man and God in which the man explains he heard God and knew he was naked so he thought he should hide. What follows is one of my all-time favorite lines in the Bible. God says to Adam, “who told you that you were naked?” You could not possibly know that unless someone told you, God is implying. So, God answers his own question. “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” Ah ha! God is saying. You have knowledge. Only one way that happened. Come on, ‘fess up.

And what does Adam say? The woman made me do it. Yep, Adam throws Eve right under the bus. But he doesn’t stop there. Adam actually blames God for making the woman in the first place! “The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit

of the tree and I ate.” It’s all *her* fault! *She* made me do it! Okay, fine. God turns to the woman, and speaks calmly. God is not yelling or thundering or raging at the woman. He just asks, “what is this you have done?” She in turn throws the snake under the bus saying it tricked her into eating the fruit. This, incidentally, is why the snake is often referred to as the trickster, and it is this description of the snake that later interpreters use to make the connection of the snake to Satan.

The end of the story is not part of what we read this morning because it’s a long poem which basically summarizes what will happen now that they have gained the knowledge of good and evil. The woman will be made to suffer in childbirth. The man will be made to toil and work hard all the days of life instead of just hanging out in the garden. The snake will be forever slithering on the ground eating dirt. For the people hearing this story in the ancient world, this would be the life they knew each day. Therefore, this story explains for them how it is that life came to be so difficult when the first days of the Creation were so wonderful. It also explains how wisdom came into the world, how knowledge came to be. It was always there from the beginning, in the middle of the garden of paradise just waiting to be found and consumed. The story also explains why no one knows where this beautiful garden of Eden is now and why it’s never been found.

So, in this wonderful story, what we have is not an accounting of original sin but instead an etiology – a story of why the world we live in is as it is. This is a story which explains how it is that God is good and loving, all knowing and all powerful, but life is still difficult and painful. It explains why childbirth – the bringing of new life, is so painful and dangerous. It explains why life is an endless series of work filled days. This story also explains how it is that wisdom, knowledge, came to be and how the inbreaking of wisdom into the world made everything change forever. Humans were no longer simple innocents wandering mindlessly and eternally through a garden paradise. They had to become productive, thinking humans whose relationship with God now required intentionality and faithful attention. It was no longer automatic. At its core, this is a story of how humans went from being God’s pets to God’s people, and all the good and bad that came with that incredible transformation.

Worthy of special mention in our exploration of this foundational story is the damage later interpretations have done to women throughout history. Branded as a sinful temptress in artworks over the centuries, Eve was nothing of the kind. She was intended in this story to be the exemplar of and for all women – brave enough to reach for knowledge, trusting in her own instincts that to have wisdom could not be a bad thing. And yet this very same story has been used for millennia as an excuse for the

mistreatment and control of women's lives and even their bodies by men. This story has been misused by so many for so long to argue that women are inherently inferior to men, perpetually in need of guidance and the control of men to keep from giving in to their inherently sinful natures. It was this story lurking behind the Salem witch trials and the persecution of wise women and midwives periodically during the Middle Ages. It is still this story cited by Christian churches as one of the reasons women cannot be ordained in the Catholic church and in several Protestant denominations which have active churches right in this area. It is this story which has been used for thousands of years to keep women in their places. Places defined and controlled by men.

But guess what. It never worked. And it will never work because this story was not ever and is not now about women as the originators of sin. Instead, this story is about women as the procurers of wisdom and the givers of new life. This has always been and will always be a story about how wisdom came into the world and changed everything. Some of those changes were good and some were bad but such is the stuff of life each day. May we find in ourselves Eve's courage to reach for wisdom without counting the cost and her simple confidence that God would understand. And God did. Amen.