

“ADAM AND EVE AND THE SNAKE”

Genesis 2:15-23, 3:1-14, 22-24

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This ancient story is very different from the version of creation in Genesis 1, where God speaks and, simply from the power of God’s word, cosmos, world, and creatures spring into being, and God declares it all good. That account is sweeping, cosmic, orderly, and poetic - liturgical, almost.

Genesis 2 and 3 give us something quite different, and not just in the details and the order of events. These chapters read more like folklore: God shapes a human creature out of dirt and breathes life into it. Then God realizes that a companion is needed. After making a variety of animals and birds which don’t turn out to be the right companion, God makes a second human being from a part of the first... and we have a man and a woman. There’s a garden, and a talking snake; there’s a mysterious prohibition and disastrous consequences when it’s violated.

Although we sometimes think of stories like this one as providing explanations for why certain things are as they are, in fact they leave us with as many questions as answers. This story offers us a lot of images and ideas to ponder, because it reflects on stuff we wonder about anyway: human nature and relationships and desires and choices, the nature of evil, what God has to do with us and our world, why we have to suffer and work so hard. But it’s the nature of a story like this to, well, tell the story and leave us to mull it over.

When I learned this story in Sunday School, it was taught as literal and factual. How I remember it mostly is as a story about how foolish and stupid Adam and Eve were to disobey one of God’s rules. I particularly remember the illustration on our Sunday School paper of the stern angel with a flaming sword ushering the shamed and cowering couple out of the garden gate.

The lesson as I remember it was two-fold: disobeying God’s rules will get you into trouble (that was the theme of a lot of our lessons, I believe!) and we are all in that kind of trouble because Adam and Eve started the whole human race down the path of disobedience, for which we are all still being punished. Maybe if they hadn’t eaten the fruit, things would be different.

Even as a child, I wondered about this.

In the first place, the “rule” that Eve and Adam disobeyed seemed to me kind of ... arbitrary and, well, tempting in and of itself. Who needs the snake, really? Tell me I can eat the fruit from all the trees except one, and which fruit am I naturally gonna want? Surely that ought to have been obvious to God???

Then too: how can understanding good and evil, right and wrong (as that fruit supposedly made possible) be a bad thing? Knowledge is a good thing, isn't it?

Maybe you wondered some of those same things. Maybe like me you just had to accept that God is in charge and God had God's reasons.

Looking at the story now, I realize how hard it is to read it with fresh eyes, not because of the Sunday School version, but because I'm aware of ALL the theological overlay this story has acquired through the centuries. While it's actually not much referenced in other parts of the Bible, it plays a significant role in the writings of the Apostle Paul and therefore in the thinking of countless Christian thinkers after him. Thanks to them, we talk about what happens in this story as "the fall," meaning that Adam and Eve fell from grace into sin. But to approach this story with fresh eyes, it's worth noting that the words "fall" and "sin" are nowhere to be found in the story itself. Those are *theological* interpretations.

We have also inherited a lot of other ideas about this story:

That the snake is Satan or the devil

That the story establishes gender roles and the subordination of women to men from the very creation of human beings

That the first sin of eating the fruit was somehow also about sexual temptation, and that therefore sin and sex are closely wrapped up together.

That Eve was a temptress and it's really all her fault.

That this story is about the origin of evil and about how death came into the world.

That as human beings were expelled from the garden, they were also separated from God.

None of those notions is actually supported by the text of the story. But it's hard to escape them, because they have been so pervasive, not just in church teaching through the centuries but in art, literature and popular culture as well. (If you google images of "Adam and Eve" you can see what I'm talking about.)

Still, we can try to see beyond all that and make an effort to hear this story for itself.

I found Walter Brueggemann helpful on this. In his Genesis commentary, he reminds me that this story (and most of the Bible) is not all that interested in abstract questions about sin, death, evil, fall, and so forth. These are theological ideas separated from faithfulness; as such they're not the real issues of the text and in any case the Bible is not an answer book for all of our questions. It's ok and proper to say that there are questions for which we have no answers. What the text IS concerned with, according to Brueggemann, is issues of faith: what are God's purposes? how do we find ourselves within those purposes? will we trust God? how will we respond to God's call to be God's creatures and to live in God's world as God intends?

Brueggemann describes the intention of God for the human creature as three-fold, in the story: purpose, permission, and prohibition... although he points out that we tend to focus almost entirely on the prohibition, which I guess makes us a lot like Eve and Adam in the story!

The purpose is to take care of the garden. Work, vocation, is part of the plan from the beginning, continuing what God began in planting the garden. It's clearly supposed to be a joint effort. Community and relationship and cooperation are what we are meant for.

The permission, the freedom, is very broad. They can have all they need, from the abundance of the garden. They are free to explore the garden, and life, together.

The prohibition is quite specific. It isn't explained, but it says clearly: the responsibility and freedom of these creatures are not infinite. They have limits, and those limits must be respected. It's a boundary of protection.

And that's where the snake comes in. Walter Brueggeman sees the snake as simply the voice that's needed to move the plot along. It's the snake who introduces some talk about theological ideas that move the two humans very quickly to a whole new place. Interesting tidbit: the Hebrew words for "smart" and "naked" have a similar sound, so it could be said that the snake was "shrewd" and Adam and Eve were "nude" ... kind of a telling commentary on their vulnerability to a plausible-sounding line.

And before we know it, they are talking *about* God instead of *with* God – theology instead of obedience or relationship. The notion of limits is questioned, and the appeal of boundary-pushing suddenly becomes irresistible. The trust that had existed slips away, as a closer look reveals that the forbidden fruit looks really, really good, in spite of what God said. Eve argues, but not for long, and Adam doesn't argue at all. In the end, it's easy to be deceived.

And the harmony that had existed is disturbed at once. Freedom and openness give way to vulnerability and shame. Where there was trust, there is fear. Cooperation turns to blame. Control and hierarchy begin to replace mutuality in relationship. I don't know if you can see it in the copies, but one reason I liked the picture that's on the front of your bulletin is the sky in the background behind Adam and Eve is full of cracks... suggesting that the peace of the world has been shattered.

The calling to care for the garden is forgotten, as is all gratitude for its gifts. God is now seen not as friend or protector or provider, but only as the one who prohibits and punishes. God's presence in the garden is now not welcomed but feared. You can't hide from God, though, and Eve and Adam are called to account. "Did you eat from that tree?" Of course, we think, God already knows. But the question and the answer are important: "I was afraid," is the first response.

No excuses or avoidance are possible. The deed can't be undone, the knowledge can't be un-known, the hurt can't be un-felt. Things can't be like they were. The humans have to take their new-found knowledge out of the garden and into the world, where life is going to be hard, as all of us who hear this story know, only too well. There will be pain and hard work and there will be some element of brokenness in their relationships.

But it turns out that God still cares for these human creatures God has made. Though the story has led us to think that they will be punished with death, they are allowed to live.

(God does, however, make sure they can't get to the fruit that might allow them to live forever.) God protects them, makes them clothing, keeps them alive. More than that, it turns out that God doesn't stay behind in the garden but goes with them. And the story will go on from here to become a story about how God will continue to relate to, love, call, work with, and bless these humans and their descendants. If you want to use the language of "fall" to refer to this story, perhaps it is best to think of it, as one of my seminary professors said, as a "fall into grace."

If we feel a strong identification with Eve and Adam, that's not surprising. Because ultimately this is less a story about origins than about what it is to be human, and to live in God's world. It is not so much a source of doctrine as an invitation to reflection.

Our ponderings could go in many directions: This story invites us to think about how we view God, about the relationships between men and women and about all our human relationships, about how they are broken and how they can be healed, and also about our relationships with the earth and all its creatures. It invites us to think about honesty, about equality and inequality, about power, about work, about suffering and vulnerability, about purpose, about freedom, about limits.

There's a tension in this story between our reach and our limits. The story honors human potential and choice. But it also suggests that the assertion of human autonomy - making ourselves our own god and authority and point of reference - is a denial of who we are and a dangerous path. This story affirms the necessity of boundaries for us to flourish as truly human beings.

We probably shouldn't see here a glorification of ignorance or naïve innocence. In any case, there is no going back. But the story reminds us that knowledge isn't the same as wisdom. It confers power for sure, but it sometimes comes at a price. And knowledge in and of itself - without faithfulness, without reference to God or to our relationships - can be destructive. We know this. Our history and our present are filled with examples of brilliant minds and powerful talents turned to evil, selfish, destructive purposes through an arrogance that denies allegiance to anything but self.

Everything there is to ponder in this story directs us to remember that we are human - and keep in mind that "human," the "humus" or the soil of the earth, and "humility" all come from the same word. And those are not bad things, but good things, life-sustaining things, gifts of a gracious God, to whose care we can trust our lives. Don't get lost in the heady theological arguments; this is a story we can ground ourselves in.

Amen.

Resources:

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation Commentary), John Knox Press, 1982.
Essays by Elaine Pagels and Robert Coles in *Talking about Genesis: a Resource Guide*, Public Affairs Television, 1996.