

## ONCE UPON A TIME IN A GARDEN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Lent I, February 10, 2008

Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

There were two particular trees in the Garden of Eden, and both were beautiful and tempting. Of all the trees that were pleasant to the sight and good for food, it was finally these two that became the primary focal points of the choices we made there in the garden. I say “we” because the story of the garden is our story. It is just as much our story as it is of these long lost relatives dwelling in paradise long ago and far away.

Even the names of the primary participants are our names in Hebrew, *Adam* – Man, and *Eve* – Woman. Their choices are our choices, their denials our denials, their alienation our alienation. When we hear their story read aloud we might be advised to hide our nakedness, because their story lays bare more of our story than we might modestly feel comfortable having read out loud in such a public setting.

The tale itself is almost too familiar. There is a garden at the beginning – a glorious, fragrant, lush and welcoming garden. A place where the ficus and fig trees, the birches and redwoods, the laurel and rhodendra are more beautiful than words can describe. There the trees bear fruit in season that is delicious; pears, and oranges, and those devilishly good apples, so ripe, so fragrant, so tangy.

But what is a garden without someone to enjoy it with you? To stroll the verdant paths, to lean over and smell the roses with you, to bend down and look into the tulips, to pause and linger over the intricacy of the orchids? Someone in the secluded garden glade to strip off their clothes with you like kids playing hooky and jump in the stream and stand under the waterfall, the cascade gushing down on you! Someone must be in the garden to say with you, “Ah, this is beautiful.”

So God placed the first of a species, a human being in the garden to enjoy it and keep it. And the fruit was his to savor. Except... except the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That tree was forbidden. Something about it, God said, was deadly. It would tell you more than you could understand. Something would happen to your eyes. You might see too much. To eat of it was to lose something important in life, and it would spoil everything.

But as beautiful as the garden was, as right as it seemed to have a human being there, it still was incomplete. Something was missing. Without a soul mate, a partner, a companion, a friend and helpmate it was not finished. So a woman was given to the creation as a gift, a surprise in the created order, the crowning glory of all that God made, because by her being there, aloneness was addressed, and community was created, and she brought companionship, the opposite of loneliness. She was no afterthought, she was the final fulfillment of the creation.

And the man and the woman lived where the trees were lush and beautiful. And among them was the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And all in all it was a good idea. It was going well. God and man and woman in the garden together. There were no secrets, no whispers, no lies, no hiding. And the man and the woman were naked, and they were not ashamed. They liked it. It felt natural and good.

The writer of the letter of St. John put it this way, “Perfect love casts out fear,” and I would add, “perfect love not only casts out fear, it casts out anxiety and shame as well. And love was in the garden, God’s love for the creation. So that everything was in balance, no shame, no anxiety, no fear, only trust.

The man and the woman were naked, the writer of Genesis tells us. But the primary point is not that they lacked clothes. The primary point is that they could see and know one another, in the deepest and most important sense, not the silly, giggly junior high meaning of being naked, of sneaking a look at another’s nakedness, the clandestine perusal of the pornographic magazine, or the sleazy late night visit to the strip joint.

No, the Man and the Woman had nothing to hide from each other, neither their bodies nor their souls. All they saw was the beauty of each other’s being. And what they saw was good. There was innocence between them and patience and understanding. They trusted and loved one another and they loved and trusted God.

It was so long ago in our memory that it was a time before what went wrong went wrong, a time before we needed to hide, or thought we needed to hide, from God and one another. It was a time of trust and communion and harmony in the creation.

We know, of course, that we are not reading Gibbons, or Schlessinger, Michener, when we read Genesis. This is not history we are reading, even a literalist should know that this is pre-history. This is a story written by faith to faith. It is our identity story, more true than history, more universal than biography. This is the story of our innocence, the story of that time when we were naked and not ashamed. We all were there at one time, weren’t we, once upon a time. Naked and unashamed. Do you remember? This is the story of that time before anxiety came and mistrust took over.

That time when there was innocence and beauty. When there were no whispers, no sideward glance, no lies. It was a time in childhood perhaps, when you could trust a friend and reveal your soul, and speak of yourself. Confide your greatest hope and tell your truest truth and no one would laugh or think it unlikely. When parents created your world for you and you could trust them and you were safe.

Perhaps the innocence was when you loved at first, when every day brought eager discoveries of your beloved, and all the discoveries were welcome. In innocence and trust you took that partner for life, and life then was a garden, lush and verdant and beautiful. That time before whatever went wrong went wrong.

It was a time perhaps when health seemed indestructible and life immortal and these bodies of ours inexhaustible. A time when we could trust our bodies, before the eyes, and the back, and the knee, and the heart failed. It was a time before the apple, before the lies and the betrayals, before the whispers and sideward glances and hiding.

There was a garden once upon a time with two trees and we loved it there before we began to doubt, before our communion with one another got broken, before we did that thing that we did that messed it all up.

The story is so misunderstood. This tale of the garden and its trees. It is not the story for instance of man’s preeminence over woman. It’s not the story of a woman’s betrayal of the human race, or of her particular susceptibility to the serpent’s clever ways, they both fall for that. It is not a condemnation of sex or any particular evil wrought by

sexual desire. And it is not a condemnation of same sex attraction either as our fundamentalist friends want to argue. It doesn't speak to that at all. How like our nature to make of this story about God a story controlled by us, imposing on it our agendas of social order and propriety, our expectations of how society and communal life should be structured.

In Jewish theology, this story of humanity's fall plays no major role in shaping the story of faith. Terrence Fretheim, the Old Testament scholar says that the story of the Fall barely has a place in Jewish theology at all. For Jews, the story of the Fall is simply the first instance of humanity's failure to keep God's covenant. It's Paul that makes the link between the Garden and sin's entry into the creation.

What this story is, at its core, is a story of a good and loving God and that God's resolve that life should reign in a world hell bent on choosing death. God warns us at the outset that the one tree from which we must not eat for our own good is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To eat from that tree, God says, will surely cause death. Death, God says. But after the Man and the Woman have eaten from the tree, neither dies. Death, God said. But neither died.

For a moment it looks as if the serpent has told the truth. "You will not die," he told the Woman. And so it is with all temptation, the lies that are told, there is always enough truth in them to make them believable, especially if you want to believe them. But the element of truth here is a distortion. The serpent has changed the grammar of the narrative, and we barely noticed. The serpent is finally wrong. Something in them does die. Their innocence and security, their trust of God and one another starts to die that day.

The garden has become a place where they must hide. For God who was their friend and provider has now become a threat to them in their minds.

Their communion is broken and they are aliens in their own home. God walks in the garden soon, and they hide behind the flimsy fig leaves they have sewn together which ironically only exposes their guilt and shame even more. God knows instantly that something is wrong.

"What are these silly things that you are wearing?" God asks them, "And why are you hiding?" It is that moment of truth that comes when the truth is exposed and we nakedly hide behind whatever flimsy covers we can sew together. "I didn't do anything," Adam says. "She made me do it. I'm not responsible."

And the Woman says, "That snake made me do it. I fell for his lie. I'm not responsible."

We know about the lies...

"I didn't do it," our five year old tells us looking at the shattered crystal bowl on the floor. "She did it," he says looking at his sister crying. "I'm not responsible."

"What have you done says the woman?" "We must never speak of this," he says, adjusting his fig leaf, "never."

"I have only your interests at heart," you boss says, distorting the truth with a sideward glance.

“Trust me,” she says, “this is the only way this can work.”

The lie is told, the conspiracy launched, the whisper is spoken. The innocence is broken and the trust dies in hiding.

Once there was a garden, verdant and lush and beautiful, with fruit to delight the eye, and community and companionship kept loneliness at bay. And then there was the lie, and the lie was that no one was responsible.

“If you eat of that tree,” God said, you will surely die. But God had more at stake in the garden than the creatures did. It was a creation of love. And God would not let it die. So they who died a bit that day were given a reprieve. The serpent was cursed, the temptation was damned, the man was given work to do, the woman pain in childbearing, yet her desire would be for her husband.

They were banished from the garden because their innocence was lost and all because they did not trust God who had provided for them abundantly, given them life, and community, and food, and a place where they were safe. A place with no whispers or lies before they messed it up.

So the story of the garden is finally a story about the fact that we would rather trust ourselves than believe that this God who has given us all things will continue to give us all things. And part of it is that we do not see ourselves with the eyes of love with which God sees us. And so, insecure, we try to seize life for ourselves, to macerate and shape and beat it into our own fashioning and make a mess of it in the process.

The Genesis story is a story of a God who will not give up on us; a God who is determined that life should reign in a world which is hell bent on choosing death. Which is why Jesus goes to the desert, to be tested and not succumb as did our forebears so long ago in the garden. He who takes responsibility for all our sin, the new Adam, gives his life so that we may have life, and have it abundantly.

If our story, Adam’s and Eve’s, yours and mine begins in a garden, it ends much later in a place where a garden also figures, the night of a good man’s arrest, a man who went to the wilderness for our sake, and who, on another tree in nakedness lays bare the contrast between good and evil. On that tree will hang a savior and by his presence there transform a tree of evil into a tree of life.

Lent begins quite early this year, as early as it can, with the story of our nature, a remembrance of all that this season recalls; the whispers, the lies, the sideward glances, the hiding, the lack of trust in God’s grace and love that causes our betrayals. “We are not responsible,” we cry, but if not us, then who?

Come, let us begin these forty days now at this table where the past may be left aside, where there is no need to whisper, where there is no sideward glance, no hiding necessary. For here is the garden restored, the place of communion and forgiveness, and all are welcome to eat of its fruit.

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