

Lauren Baske Davis
First UCC “Beginnings” Sermon Series - Genesis 3
September 29, 2019

Genesis 3

Now 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”?’² The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;³ 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.”’⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die;⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’⁶ 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.⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. **8** They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.⁹ But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’¹⁰ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’¹¹ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’¹² The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’¹³ Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate.’¹⁴ The Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this,*

*cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.*

¹⁵ *I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.’*

¹⁶ *To the woman he said,
‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.’*

¹⁷ *And to the man* he said,
‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
“*You shall not eat of it*”,*

*cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;*

¹⁸ *thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.*

¹⁹ *By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.’*

²⁰ *The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live.* ²¹ *And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man* and for his wife, and clothed them. **22** Then 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*

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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.

Sermon

When I was in college my first year, I did what college students sometimes do. Sometimes college students get a tattoo, sometimes they get a piercing. And I was no different. Knowing full well what my parents said when I asked for a cartilage piercing in my ear in high school, (no), I went to college, and not right away, but eventually that first year away, got that cartilage piercing in my ear. My sister, who’s older, came to visit me one weekend, and took me out to breakfast. I had forgotten my new piercing when I tucked my hair behind my ear, and my sister promptly saw my piercing and said, “when did you get *that*?” The first time I went home for a school break that year, I made sure my hair was down and the piercing wasn’t visible. At least at first. It was as if I was naked and afraid. Because though I was a *college* student, I knew their opinion on it. And I’d done it anyway. So I hid.

Years later, when my son was 2, he and I had just put chocolate cupcakes into the oven to bake. I started to clean up, and needed to run downstairs for a minute to grab a clean dish towel from the dryer. I mentioned to him not to lick the bowl, because of the raw egg in the batter. But when I came back, as you might expect...he had a chocolate cupcake batter goatee around his mouth. Knowing he didn’t know what his face was revealing, I asked, “Did you lick the bowl?” to which he responded “No,” because he was afraid. Not truly afraid, but he hid the truth because he knew I’d told him not to do it.

This morning, we witnessed the story of God telling the humans to eat of *any* tree in the garden, except the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We witnessed the woman having a conversation with a serpent. A serpent—not the devil, not even a remotely “evil” creature—there’s a lot to unpack about this story. And while we might think we know it well—*because* it is packed full with thousands of years of baggage—its worth mentioning that in the actual story, there’s no mention of sin, no mention of the devil, or of a fall from perfection. There’s no perfection at all in the garden or in the creation stories. The scripture doesn’t say God created and it was perfect, it says God created and it was *good*.

So, as I was saying, the woman has a conversation with the serpent while the man is right next to her. Again, we have baggage here—the woman has been handed the blame in this story for eons. But both humans eat the fruit, then run and hide when they hear God walking in the garden, because they’re afraid. Because they knew not to eat it, and they did anyway.

While this story holds a great deal of baggage because of how the Christian tradition has handled it in terms of gender roles, whether its gender or original sin, or the fall, that history and culture have perpetuated, we must understand something. This story, this *beginnings* story, is at its core, like a parable. It was never intended to tell us the *history* of humanity, nor was it to place blame. *So lets all take a moment to breathe a big collective breath. Let’s breath out the baggage that has accompanied this tale for so long.*

This beginnings story, this parable, was written to illustrate some truths about humanity, creation, and God. It is a story we can walk around in and learn something new each time we pass through it because it holds a lot. When you take a metaphorical story literally, though, you end up with absurdity.²

² Rev. Alan Storey, one of his frequent quotes.

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Genesis 3, was meant to be a parable, and it was used to offer some answers to important questions that people were asking. Namely, why do humans struggle? Why is there pain in childbirth? Why is the ground hard to work? Why are women oppressed by men? Why do women still partner with those who oppress them? Why, in the end, do we return to the dust? Why do we want the one thing we can't have, and what are the consequences of that? Why would an all-powerful God create a world where all of these realities exist? And the burning question that is on everyone's minds: why don't snakes have legs?

While the story does not suggest that the man and the woman sinned,³ there were a great number of well-established understandings in the Ancient Near East that acknowledged humanity as faulted, complex, and rebellious. It was widely accepted that humans were capable of, and bear some responsibility for the way things are in the world.⁴

But there is a bigger theme going on here that we can see by looking at the characters in this beginning story. Now, I love dwelling in stories like this. The point for me isn't whether they happened, but how they're true. What I am interested in is, what is this origin story is telling us about motivations, character, and identity—what truths it has to tell us about the humans, the creation, and God?

First, we need to remember what the previous chapter of Genesis is about. It's the series of creation stories. Last week, Pastor Todd talked about the creation of the two humans, one from the other's side.

When God makes the first human out of the dirt, quite literally, an earth creature, God says its good, so God keeps creating animals and insects, all sorts of creatures, and then God sees none of them are an equal companion for the human. God sees that the human is lonely, and for the first time, says, “that's *not* good,” so God puts them in a deep sleep, takes a rib out of that human, and forms a new human. When the first human wakes and sees the other, they exclaim, “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh!” which is a poetic way of saying, “I see myself in you, and you in me! You are someone with whom I can connect!” And the connection between God and the humans, the humans with creation, God with creation, is again *good*.

But contrast that with what happens here after the humans eat the fruit. They hide, and when God comes looking for them, God calls out, “where are you?” Which doesn't come through in the translation, but the word choice tells us that this question isn't about location. Its: “I know you're hiding—why?” And “I see you are ashamed to come out, and I am heartbroken. Where are you?”

Here we have a clue about God's character—God's first word to the humans is a desire for closeness and connection—but the human don't hear it that way. If we're really honest perhaps we can all see that we've been here, blaming others to bury our own insecurity. The man says, “it wasn't me!” and blames the woman, the woman says, “it wasn't me!” and blames the serpent, and as the old joke goes, the serpent doesn't have a leg to stand on.

The humans choose the blame game over taking responsibility for what has happened. What was once, “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh!” is now “It wasn't me, it was her!” We see

³ Rabbi Robert Orkand,
<https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-life/arts-culture/literature/rise-and-fall-adam-and-eve>

⁴ Terry Fretheim, “Is Genesis 3 a Fall Story?” *Word and World*, 14/2, 1994,
http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/14-2_Genesis/14-2_Fretheim.pdf.

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the disconnect. Maybe we can even feel it. And as a result, there is a rift between the humans and the creation: “*cursed is the ground because of you; [God says,] in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.*” Eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil has brought about greater difficulty in life, and has broken the deep connections between God and the people, and the people and the good creation.

Perhaps this isn’t the great surprise of the story—especially given ancient understandings of humans as rebellious and faulted. The surprise of the story *isn’t* that the humans make choices that have devastating consequences for themselves and for the earth.

The surprise is that God reacts with life, not death. It’s one of the first acts of grace of God in our sacred texts. When God told them not to eat of the one tree, they did. But when God told them they would die if they did...well, they didn’t.

The humans made a choice. To ignore the healthy boundary God had set up. And God made a choice too...to ignore the consequence God had set up. Instead, out of grace, God drew a bigger boundary. As a consequence, the man and the woman have to leave the garden and will have to learn to live with boundaries, with limits. Which can tell us something too.

But there is *another* act of grace in the story too. God gives them clothes. That’s God’s first concern for the people. God gives them life, not death, a new albeit difficult beginning, and clothing in the midst of disappointment. They are given continued relationship with God and the gift of starting over.

And we know if we keep reading that the people survive this adversity. Which perhaps is another big theme for these humans. In later years, surviving adversity is what makes Israel who they are and is a story to characterize “what humans have done from the beginning.”⁵

And let us not forget, that this story shows us a God who created all things good, who gave creatures free will, who gives generously but also reminds us of our limits. This God wants nothing more than connection. Even as we continue to be a faulted, limit breaching people, God continues to find ways to have connection and to make good out of devastating situations.

What we might gather from this beginning, this origin story is that though we live in a society that values being clever, being individuals, being free to choose whatever we want to do, that we are created for connection by a God who values community and relationships among all of creation. That, fallible, afraid and looking to hide as we all are, God still needs us to live out that loving interconnectedness and community. To live out what it is to be fully human. To live out the reality of love and grace that began with the words, “in the beginning.” Amen.

⁵ Ibid.