

Adam and Eve

June 3, 2012

Genesis 2:15-25 (includes the rest of the story)

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

18 Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'¹⁹So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said,

*'This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;*

*this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.'*

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Imagine this scene – you sit on a tiny chair with a group of young children sitting in front of you. Your mission is to tell a Bible story. You haven't prepared because you are thinking to yourself, "I know this story." You start to read and suddenly that little voice inside your head starts to scream – "I didn't know this was part of the story...." You suddenly realize why Bible stories for children are almost never read from the Bible, but rather a paraphrased story book. While it is well and good that children get exposed to Biblical stories in small doses we do ourselves a disservice if we never read the stories from the Bible in context. Even if you know the great Biblical classics, it never hurts to refresh our memories lest we fill in the gaps with what we think they say.

So this summer I am doing something a little different. All summer long we are going to revisit, or perhaps visit for the first time, some of the most iconic stories of the Old Testament. Tim Beal who has written a book on the essential stories we need to know to be Biblically literate argues, "you can't be culturally literate without being basically familiar with Biblical literature. Biblical literacy is a prerequisite for cultural literacy. The Bible is quoted, referenced, and alluded to by thousands of great writers, orators, composers, and artists in tens of thousands of classic cultural works." It is also referenced in modern and popular culture from the Simpsons to the World Wrestling Federation. Biblical expressions also shape our social and political lives. Liberation from bondage is the theme of the story of the Exodus as well as our own Civil Rights movement.

The fact that so many of these stories are told and retold, painted and sculpted, in different times and in different cultures makes it challenging to strip them down to the actual story, as told in the Bible. The story of Adam and Eve demonstrates this difficulty. I'll show you with a quiz:

- Raise your hand if you think there is an apple in this story.
- Raise your hand if you think the serpent was "evil."
- Raise your hand if someone ever told you that women were "less than" men because of this story.
- Raise your hand if you were taught that this is the story of "original sin."

- Raise your hand if you think this tells the story of “the fall.”
- Raise your hand if you think Eve made Adam eat of the tree.
- Raise your hand if you were taught that this is story explains why we have to work.

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is one of the most used and most misunderstood texts in Genesis and perhaps the entire Bible. (Brueggeman p. 41, Interpretation *Genesis*) No doubt apples have gotten a bad rap from people misreading this text, forever associated with temptation and seduction. Women have also suffered as a result of this text on two fronts; they have been portrayed as subordinate to men because of this story AND they have been portrayed as temptresses of evil.

Finally, though I could say more, the idea that the sin of Adam (and Eve) was passed on to all of their descendants came to be misunderstood by some as “original sin,” as the result of something the Apostle Paul said much later.

We have to peel away these layers of interpretation and commonly accepted teachings so we can be open to the story with fresh ears and eyes. We have to leave behind the notion that we are reading history. This is not history. Scripture is not a historical record. It is a collection of books about God’s relationship with humankind. So we have to ask: What does the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden have to tell us about this relationship?

I can tell you already that it doesn’t say:

- We are born evil.
- Women are subordinate to men.
- “The devil made me do it!”

The story starts with God creating Adam out of the dust and placing in him a garden to tend and to keep. Adam had the freedom to eat the fruit of any tree with the exception of one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God saw that it was not good for the man to be alone so out of the ground God formed the animals and birds, and Adam named them all but none sufficed as a partner. So God formed Eve from Adam’s side to be his partner.

“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”?’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘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.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘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.’ 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. 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.”

Note that the serpent is not evil. It is not Satan. Everything it says is true. The serpent is simply pointing out that Eve and Adam have the freedom to eat of the tree, which they did.

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. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you

gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ 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.’ 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.*

*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.’*

*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.’*

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

*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.’*

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

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’— therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He 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.

This story is not as simple as we have been led to believe. No one really understands the two trees. There is no simple moral to the story. Some say it explains why childbirth hurts or why snakes crawl but surely there is more. It speaks of blame and shame. Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent and they both blame God for putting the serpent there in the first place. They experience shame when their knowledge of their own nakedness reveals their transgression. But it is not about blame or shame, is it?

If anything, this story gives us insight into our human nature. Like the old joke says, “There are three ways to get something done: do it yourself, hire someone to do it, or forbid your children to do it.” We don’t like limits

and boundaries, even when they are for our own good. We test them and cross them and why? because we can. We have that freedom.

And then we wonder: How did this happen? We are surprised when there are consequences. We are shocked that the Garden of goodness has escaped us.

What are we to do with the freedom God has given us? What are the limits of that freedom? At what point do we finally realize that God knows best?

When you figure it out, let me and the rest of the world know. Amen.