

“Hidden in Plain Sight”

Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8

New Revised Standard Version

It is Gathering Sunday, and while we cannot gather in person, what we can do is gather ourselves up in the Story of God and ground ourselves, once again, in our God-given identity and purpose.

Today begins our second year with the Narrative Lectionary – a four year cycle of texts that takes us through a range of specific stories in the Old & New Testaments, so that we can see the narrative arc of how God is at work in God’s people, so that we can proclaim the Good News – that God creates us with love, teaches us how to love, calls us to love, empowers us to love, forgives us when we fail to love, and gives us infinite second chances to try again.

“In the Beginning.” *Bereshit*. It’s the first word in the book of Genesis. Genesis is our origin story. Our beginning. Sometimes, especially when we feel lost, we need to go back to the beginning to see if we can reorient ourselves and reground

ourselves. The middle of a global pandemic and two months away from a critical national election feels like as good as time as any to get grounded doesn’t it?

Our grounding begins in a garden. The Garden of Eden. We know this story well and there’s probably part of this story that we know SO well that we actually don’t even know that what we know isn’t part of the original story at all.

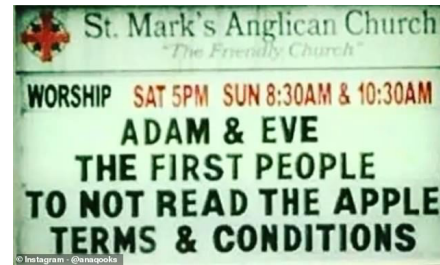
It’s like the game of telephone where you pick a phrase and pass it down the line. One person whispers to the next: “snake in the grass,” and as it passes along it becomes, “skate in the grass,” “spade in the grass,” “splayed in glass,” “sprayed with gas,” “played and gasped,” “prayed and fast!” And all the sudden the Garden of Eden becomes the Garden of Gethsemane, with Jesus on his knees praying and fasting instead of a snake in the grass eyeing some fruit.

Biblical interpretation is kind of like this. As the stories get told and retold, layers of meaning get added on that may or may not be true. So like those Russian Matryoshka or babushka dolls, the dolls that stack and nest one inside the other,



our task in reading the Bible is to sometimes figure out how to get to the first layer of the text, or the innermost doll, the original one, the one without all the elaborate decorations and details. It will still be an interpretation, but how can we uncover what we feel God is telling us instead of solely relying on what others have told us for years, on what others have piled onto the text?

Case in point: have you seen the church marquee sign that says, “*Adam and Eve: the first people to not read the Apple terms and conditions.*”



While it is a clever jab at our internet culture (who EVER reads those terms and conditions before clicking the box and proceeding?) it is a poor reading of our story today.¹

After all the text in Genesis never mentions an apple. And the woman and man were told clearly what the cause/effect relationship was when it came to the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; they didn't have to read anything. There are just so many misconceptions about this text.

This scene has been dubbed forever it seems as “The Fall” and it led to an entire doctrine called the “doctrine of original sin” (thank you St. Augustine in the 4th century) - but even years and years before in 200 BCE - the psuedopigraphic

¹ Rev. Gord Waldie, “Narrative Lectionary Leanings: Paradise Lost??? Edition (Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8),” *RevGalBlogPals* (6 Sept. 2016), accessed on 11 Sept. 2020 at

<https://revgalblogpals.org/2016/09/06/narrative-lectionary-leanings-paradise-lost-edition-genesis-24b-7-15-17-31-8/>.

texts² (which are not part of our current scriptures) started retelling this story with the devil or Satan as the serpent. These rumors started years ago. But among the rumors and various interpretations, the truth has always been in plain sight even if hidden. There's no devil here, no Satan. There's just a man. A woman. And a serpent; albeit a "crafty" serpent mind you.

"Crafty" is a legit translation for the Hebrew word, but in English we tend to put a negative connotation on it. The word might be translated as *sinister* as we see in the book of Job (Job 5:12, 15:5) but it can also be translated as *sensible* or *prudent* as we see in Proverbs (Proverbs 1:4; 8: 5, 12). It can have multiple meanings. In any case, the serpent is clever and talkative and is created by God just like every other critter in the choir of God's creation (Genesis 3:1). The serpent is no devil, the serpent is one of God's *own* creatures who simply poses some questions and alternative explanations

about what God's motivations might be in keeping the humans from the Tree. We're never told God's motivation. And neither is the serpent. At any point in the conversation, the humans could have told the serpent that he was full of it and to please go and bother someone else (that is, if there had been other folks around to bother).³

The serpent doesn't make anyone do anything. It's not like the serpent bites the man or woman and puts the venom of suspicion into their blood. They are already inclined toward curiosity and suspicion, else why do they stick around to talk with the serpent?

The serpent's motive is unclear too – I mean, what's in it for him? We don't know. But the bottom line is: the serpent is just a conversation partner in this text, not a coercer. We can't place blame on others, not even way back in the beginning. God created us with agency and choice from the start. We so often blame others or point our fingers at

² Beth L. Tanner, "Commentary on Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8," *Working Preacher* (9 Sept. 2012), accessed on 11 Sept. 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1462.

³ Dennis Olson, "Commentary on Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7," *Working Preacher* (13 Mar. 2011), accessed on 11 Sept. 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=868.

influences beyond our own heart and mind, but if nothing else, this text reminds us that we must always think for ourselves and be careful about what voices we are listening to. Not everything we hear is worth heeding. That's for sure. And there are serpents everywhere, even sometimes in the sound of voices we have been taught to trust and even sometimes in the sound of our own voice.

The other crazy thing about this story is that it's so often portrayed with the woman standing alone with this seductive serpent, but the man was present all along. When the woman and the serpent speak, both use plural pronouns. In verse 3, the woman says, "*We may eat of all of the fruit...*" and in response the serpent says, "*You (masculine plural form) will not die.*" And even though it's the woman speaking, verse seven indicates that the man was right there all along: the woman eats and "*also gave some to her husband, who was with her and he ate it.*"⁴

You could also make the case that the man failed to speak up, to speak out, and to join the woman in an alliance against the serpent's attempt to appeal to the suspicions and yearnings that somehow were already within the heart of the woman and the man. Culture has a lot to do with how stories are passed down, and patriarchy did women no favors with this one. The point is – it's not the woman's fault. Fault really isn't the point anyway. Figuring out why they disobeyed in the first place is the point, I think.

I wonder if, what has been hidden in plain sight is the fact that we humans have a tendency within us to resist limits. Why can't we eat of every single other tree in the garden and be satisfied? Why do we have to have the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? Because in reality, we already know the difference between Good and Evil – the woman and man knew right from wrong, the woman saw the fruit and saw that it was good even before she ate it. They knew what God said and

⁴ Tanner, *ibid.*

yet they ate the fruit anyway.
And even still, once they ate the fruit and became ‘enlightened’ so to speak, what is most distressing is to discover that KNOWING Good and Evil has little to do with whether we DO Good or Evil. We know right from wrong, and yet we make the wrong choice a lot. Just one chapter later, one generation later, Cain will kill his brother Abel. He will do evil, even as he knows it’s wrong to do. What does this say about our humanity? That we can KNOW what we’re supposed to do and how we’re supposed to act and yet still NOT do it?

Well as Old Testament scholar Patrick Miller says, “*the whole narrative of the Primeval History flows out of this tension between being created like God and seeking to become God. One points to human possibility; the other to its plight.*”⁵

When we seek to become like God we focus on the fact that we are not God. And we can’t have everything that we want or

that we think we should have, or that we think we’re entitled to.

Think about it. The Garden of Eden is an expansive gift that God has given the man and the woman. They have everything they need and then some in the garden. But there is just one limit.⁶ One boundary they have to respect. One mandate to follow. One guideline. One.

And what happens when they encounter this one limit in the midst of such expansive generosity and abundance? They push past it because they are focused on what they do not have rather than what they do have.

It’s as if when the woman and man take that bite of fruit they are saying, “*All of this is not enough, we want more.*” This is the story of our humanity, isn’t it? This is the story of the pandemic we’re living in. It’s just one example, but it’s an ever-present one for us right now. You can go places and do things but you just need to do

⁵ Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “Commentary on Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8,” *WorkingPreacher* (13 Sept. 2020), accessed on 11 Sept. 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4579.

⁶ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker, “Podcast #416 - Creation and Fall,” *I Love to Tell the Story* (6 Sept. 2020) accessed on 11 Sept. 2020.

this one thing – you need to wear a mask to protect and preserve life. But so many don't like that limit. We push past it. What are the consequences of that over-reach? We are seeing it daily. As we climb closer and closer to 200,000 people dead in our country from COVID.

If nothing else, what this story reveals to me is that Genesis 3 shows us how soon we forget what God told us in Genesis 1 and 2. We have forgotten our created identity and purpose. And when we forget those things, we start reaching in other directions for things that aren't the healthiest or best for us. We start trying to create a different narrative with voices other than the voice of God. Even though God never leaves us, all the sudden we see only serpents and we not only see them, we listen to them, and sometimes we become them as they tell us an alternative story to the story that God gave us. You could call it Fake Good News.

The true story is this: we have more than enough because we are created from the *Adamah*, the fertile soil of the earth. God

breathed Godself (*ruach*) into the *Adamah*, soil, and created *Adam* (man). The word man means soil. Dirt. It doesn't get much more humbling than being formed from the dust of the earth. And even more, if it's also true that we are created in the image of God, the *imago dei*, as Genesis 1 tells us, then that means that God's image is somehow mixed up in the dirt too, the same dirt that's caked up in the soles of our shoes bears the soul of God. If God's image is part muck and mud, whether stardust from the heavens or sawdust from the earth, then what does that mean about our image and who we are? Dirt is not about perfection is it? Dirt is about nourishment and growth and providing a hospitable environment for growth and life. There is no such thing as perfect dirt. There is such a thing as rich soil though...soil that has what it needs to help seeds grow and flowers bloom and blossom.

If we're going to call this story "the Fall" then let's call it that because we're falling onto what we are made of from the beginning – goodness and God's breath, mess and muck, stardust and sawdust. If this

story is about a fall, then it's about how sometimes we need to fall back onto the ground that we were created from so that we can be nurtured and nourished. This is a story about a Garden after all. What happens in a garden? Growth.

Rather than a story about a “fall FROM God's grace” I see this story as one where the soil is rich WITH God's grace, such that we are created with grace and when we mess up God responds with grace.

We didn't read the rest of the story, but Genesis 3 ends with God NOT killing the woman and the man. God grants them grace. They do get another limit imposed on them. A limit that they can't break this time. They have to leave the garden. They should have just stuck with the one tree as their limit! But nonetheless, even though the Garden of Eden is now off limits for them, the rest of the world is still theirs. There is still more than enough. Can the woman and man focus on that grace and generosity from God rather than focus on what they cannot have? Can we?

Because here's the thing. Remembering our identity as created from the dust of the earth is one part of the equation. The other part is remembering why we are here, our calling, our vocation.

We learn in Genesis 2 that man was put in the garden to *avadi* it and *shamar* it. These Hebrew words are often translated as “to till” and “to keep,” but they have much stronger meanings.

Avad is used all over the Old Testament and is most often used in the context of service or even slavery. This is how it is used in Joshua 24:15: “*As for me and my household, we will serve [avad] the Lord.*”⁷

Shamar is also used a lot in the Old Testament, and it means “to actively guard; to proactively and preemptively protect from harm.” It's used six times in the eight verses of Psalm 121 to describe the God who guards Israel so closely that their foot will not

⁷ Scripture example from the document [https://creationcare.org/file_download/inline/04f681e5-](https://creationcare.org/file_download/inline/04f681e5-731e-4572-bf22-d757e56e0935)

[731e-4572-bf22-d757e56e0935](https://creationcare.org/file_download/inline/04f681e5-731e-4572-bf22-d757e56e0935), accessed on 11 Sept. 2020.

slip, and that sun will not harm them by day nor the moon by night. This is the kind of obsessive, active protection and care described by the word *shamar*.⁸

Taken together then, these two Hebrew words in Genesis 2 are much closer to something like, “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden to serve and to protect it.*” We are created to serve and to protect creation.⁹ To serve and protect or preserve the natural world, our neighbor, and ourselves.

For the most part, we humans have “served” only one part of creation – ourselves, our own species, and only part of our species at that. We have tilled and worked and produced and built and developed so much that the earth has suffered and creation has suffered and certainly other creatures have suffered, but even more, humanity has suffered. Life is lost every day because we are more devoted to keeping our lifestyle than we are to keeping God’s commandment to serve and protect the earth and one another.

What are we doing to ourselves and our world, and in turn, what are we doing to our God? We are acting as God by not caring for how we treat creation and in so doing are doing evil even though we know better.

Think of how many people say they experience God’s presence in nature, in creation? If this is the case, why are we exploiting the very place so many of us experience God’s presence? Well, we’re doing so because it makes our lives more convenient and because we think we have to keep producing and consuming. It’s all we know. Sometimes we are so engrained in our habits and culture we need a hard stop to wake us up.

I would say that we are in the midst of that hard stop right now with COVID-19. What has it taught us? What will it teach us? Is there anything hidden in plain sight that we need to unearth? That we need to rediscover? That we need to recommit to? That we need to reprioritize now that we have recalled that our purpose is to

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

serve and protect creation and one another?

Like the woman and man, our eyes are opened. We can see all we need to see. We may not know everything, but we know everything we need to know. But even as we may feel ashamed or embarrassed about our actions, God calls us out of shame and into significance. We matter. Our choices do not define us. We always have a second chance. Our turning *from God* will always and forever lead back to God *turning to* us. The circle of God's grace is never unbroken. It turns out that God never abandons us or our created goodness. We've just buried it, run from it, ignored it, denied it, or hid from it. Can we discover it anew yet again?

Hospice chaplains see the many different things people do to prepare for the death they know is coming. Family visits, long-delayed trips, letters of reconciliation and forgiveness, getting financial affairs in order - these are all familiar preparations for death. One

woman, though, had found peace through a different kind of preparation. "*When I die,*" she said, pointing to the shelves in her closet, "*each of my three children will receive nine bound volumes of my genealogical research.*"¹⁰

For her, the best way to prepare for an uncertain future was to examine the past, and to know her roots and to pass along those stories to her children. As we begin a new program year, and an uncertain school year and election year, the narrative lectionary takes us back to the beginning to tell us who we are and what our calling is.¹¹

Our identity and purpose are hidden in plain sight in this text. Don't let years of other voices and interpretations about sin and shame bury you alive. Know this truth: you are created in God's image from God's breath and from the earth's dust, and however God created you, you have something to offer this world...some way to serve, some way to care for others, for animals, for our planet, for

¹⁰ Rev. Mary Austin, "Narrative Lectionary: Muddy Revelations (Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17, 3:1-8)," *RevGalBlogPals* (7 Sept. 2020), accessed on 11 Sept. 2020 at <https://revgalblogpals.org/2020/09/07/narrative->

[lectionary-muddy-revelations-genesis-24b-7-15-17-31-8/](https://revgalblogpals.org/2020/09/07/narrative-).

¹¹ Austin, *ibid.*

yourself. We are made with
Love so that we might love
others.

Hidden in plain sight in this
text is our original goodness
and God's ever-present grace.
That is your beginning; it is my
beginning. It our story because
it is God's story. No matter
how many times we have to
begin again, may we never tire
of telling it.

Amen.