

“Where Are You?” Genesis 3:8-15
June 6, 2021 Second Sunday After Pentecost
Rev. Michele Ward

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

The story of the first man and woman in the book of Genesis has generated significant confusion and spiritual trauma because of poor interpretation. Among this laundry list of sins are societal evils such as misogyny, queerphobia, and religious manipulation. Church leaders have blamed Eve for introducing sin into the world and destroying the bliss of the Garden of Eden, giving them credence to declare women as morally weak and prone to cause men to fall in line behind them. Other parts of the creation narrative led to the adage “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” strongly stating that God made male and female, which must mean any relationship that does not fit the heteronormative model is sinful. And finally, interpreters of this passage coined the term “original sin,” using Genesis as its basis. Sin isn’t even mentioned in this story, I must add, and they extrapolated it from the creation narrative to convince us that we are inherently evil.

I am spending an entire sermon on a passage that caused and causes so much pain because I believe that the church can reclaim this story. The narratives hanging over this passage do not need to be there any longer for us. We can remove them, one layer at a time, until we can see a little more clearly. Until we can hear the voice of God calling to us, “Where are you?”

Right before this scene, the narrator introduces the reader to the snake. In Hebrew, the word for snake is closely linked to the word for serpent or dragon. When modern ears hear the word snake, it is quite common for us to think of satanic rituals, to fear their bite, or believe it to be an inherently ‘bad’ member of the animal kingdom. But for the time and place the narrator of Genesis was writing, snakes were valued for their positive qualities like wisdom, eternal life, unending youth, medicine, power, and royalty, to name a few.¹ In fact, Egypt, Canaan, and Assyria all considered the serpent associated with their gods and goddesses. It should not be a surprise, then, that the animal the early imperial enemies of Israel considered a holy creature tricked the humans and created disconnection between them and God.² The narrator tells us that the snake isn’t like the other animals.

¹Dr. Wil Gafney, “Genesis,” *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 23.

² Nichola Torbett, “Liturgy That Matters: June 6, 2021,” 4.

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Dr. Wil Gafney, womanist Hebrew scholar, says the Hebrew word used to describe the snake can be translated as “naked intelligent,” which is the same root word for what we interpret “nakedness” later in the chapter when the man and the woman eat from the tree and their eyes are opened.³

The snake talks to the woman while the man is also there, telling her that eating from the tree of knowledge will make them like God or like “the gods,” give them access to the heavenly court and that off limits realm. This is appealing to the woman, and she does what God forbade them to do--eat of the tree of knowledge and convince her man to do the same. She believes what the snake is saying--God has not told you everything, but I sure will. You can trust me. I will make sure you can have what you want, and I will be honest with you, unlike God.

What an invitation. And what a miracle.

The man and the woman evolve in this segment, and realize things about themselves they didn't know before. They notice they are not wearing anything on their bodies, so they learn how to sew and make clothes for themselves. They pay attention to their bodies in a new way, and learn how to better care for them. This evolution of their minds costs them something, though--their closer connection with God.

They hide from God when they hear God walking in the garden. And what follows is such a plaintive moment. The Hebrew text tells us that God simply calls out to them both, “Where?”⁴ instead of “Where are you?” I hear God's longing in this question. God longs to connect to the man and the woman, longs for relationship, for companionship, to give and receive love. God is asking, “Where is relationship? Where is love? Where is connection?” I hear a God that wants to deeply and meaningfully connect with humanity in this question. There is no tone of accusation judgment, or wrath in this question. Instead, it is a question full of

The man in this story blames the woman for tricking him into eating from the tree of knowledge. In turn, the woman blames the snake for talking her into

³ Gafney, 23.

⁴ Gafney, 24.

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eating it in the first place. The woman’s role in cajoling the man into breaking God’s one rule in the garden calcifies into a permanent blame game, a convenience for men who want to blame women for their sins and wrongdoings in the world. And the rest is history--the history of women being seen as the gateway to temptation and wrongdoing, and men having biblical justification for peddling these lies.

The serpent, who uses his ‘naked intelligence’ to manipulate the woman and the man, is then cursed by God. No longer can he speak with human beings like before. No longer can he walk on legs. Instead, he will slither on the ground, and they will be enemies.

Frederick Buechner writes, “To say that God drove Adam and Eve out of Eden is apparently a euphemism for saying that Adam and Eve, like the rest of us, made a break for it as soon as God happened to look the other way. If God really wanted to get rid of us, the chances are God wouldn’t have kept hounding us every step of the way ever since.”⁵

God does not want to be rid of us human beings, the creatures God created, the beauty that fills our world. Our passage for the day points us towards God’s longing for a relationship with us, with humanity. The narrative of the man and the woman in the garden longing for more understanding points towards humanity’s dissatisfaction with what we know and our desire to know more. Their desire to have more knowledge, to understand what they thought God was keeping from them, led to a rift in their relationship with God. Instead of it bringing them closer to God, it pulled them apart.

I sometimes wonder if this part of the creation story exists to explain that Israel’s God had superiority over the Near Eastern gods, since the serpent is associated with the gods of Egypt, Canaan, and Assyria. It would explain why the intelligent serpent does such a convincing job explaining how the woman and the man can become as knowledgeable as God if they follow his advice instead. He insists that God is keeping something from them, which is one of the most gnawing fears that God followers have.

⁵ Buechner, Frederick. “Humankind.” Frederick Buechner Quote of the Day, August 19, 2016. Accessed June 3, 2021.
<https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/8/19/humankind>

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So what will we do with this gnawing fear that God is keeping secrets from us? Or the illusion that if we simply learn more, we will become more? That the more we know, the more peace and power we will find?

This is impossible. We cannot find this. The illusion of ultimate knowledge and limitlessness came for the woman and the man in the garden in the form of a tree and a talking snake. But for us, it comes in the form of education, of well-laid out plans, of successful careers, or fulfilling our dreams. We cannot attain the wisdom and knowledge of God this way. We cannot outsmart or outwit the creator of the universe, as much as we might like to believe.

God is calling out to each of us, “Where? Where? Where?” desiring to meeting each of us in this time and in this place. So what will we do? Will we keep hiding in the trees, waiting for God to find out we have been trying to play God for most of our lives? Or will we come out from our secret place, and let God see us with all of our nakedness and vulnerability? Will we let God speak with us, walk with us, love us?

The choice is up to us.

Amen.