

## Origins: Becoming Human

### Genesis 3

June 30, 2019

What title would you give this chapter?

(Adam, Eve and the Apple, The Story of Original Sin, The Fall from Grace)

We can thank Augustine, a theologian in the 4th century, for introducing this Sin-Fall theology to the Church. Jews didn't and still don't understand the Garden story in that way. Neither did 100% of the teachers in the early church. And for the record...nothing is said in these verses about a Golden Delicious or a Honey Crisp or a McIntosh Apple. The fruit was more likely a fig. And by the way... Eve wasn't the only fruit-eater. Adam ate too!

Contemporary Lutheran theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber, with tongue deeply in cheek, writes that this Sin-Fall interpretation is just plain weird:

“God created the heavens and the Earth and animals and it was like, this awesome all-inclusive primeval club-med for Adam and Eve – they ran naked through the warm sunlight of an idyllic paradise and everything was theirs for the taking – except for that one tree that they were told to steer clear of. And this absolute paradise in the garden between God and Humanity lasted approximately 20 minutes. Until Eve had a chat with a talking snake and then disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. And because Eve ate some fruit she was told not to, now all of humanity is cursed and this so-called original sin of Eve’s became sort of like (contagious disease) .

Next week we’ll talk about so called “original sin”, but this week, I want to introduce you to an alternative reading of this story first hinted at by another Christian theologian, 2nd century, Irenaeus. This alternative interpretation purports that the Garden Story is about becoming fully human, the importance of making wise choices, and ultimately about God’s grace.

First, an image:

A photograph in my baby book. Long before Scrapbooking became a “thing” my well-organized mother pasted her favorite 35 mm prints of me into a photo album. In one, I am shown at age 4 months, lying outside, in a playpen, buck naked, butt side up, next to a neighbor kid, Chub Gallie, also buck naked, butt side up. We are both smiling, enjoying New Jersey summer breezes. The caption reads “At Vacation Bible School”.

Not in the Scrapbook, but emblazoned in my brain, is the day in 6th grade when Chubby Gallie brought his copy of that same photograph to school and passed it around. What was to our mothers a charming, innocent image of naked babies became, at least to me, the source of overwhelming embarrassment. Now, of course, 60 some years later, I’m thoroughly amused and not a bit embarrassed at my female baby tush alongside his boy baby’s tush.

With those thoughts of innocence, coming of age and adult maturity in your mind we turn to today’s story.

Recall that in Genesis Chapter Two God has been portrayed as Potter... has fashioned a man and a woman.

And as Provider and Permitter-giver, has given the Earthlings a garden to cultivate of tasty and plentiful food.

As Prohibitor, God has put limits on their consumption— no eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

When we meet Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in Chapter 3 they are Innocents. Like children. As blase about their nakedness as Chubby and Linda that day in 1956. Life is good. Easy. They are fully dependent on the Creator's blessings of food, shelter, climate. But until the serpent slithers in, they've had no experience in decision making, no lessons in what's right and wrong. How do they know to trust God rather than a snake? To the Hebrew story teller, a snake isn't a symbol of Satan or a metaphor for evil which erroneous readings of this text have created. Snakes in the ancient world were symbol of healing, re-growth, immortality. Snakes sometimes did symbolize the possibility of choice— choice which could move person closer or further from God.

Adam and Eve are child-like, curious explorers, 24-hour-a-day learners. And they are vulnerable. They don't know not to touch a hot stove. They don't know not to run into the street. They don't know that God, only God is trustworthy. So when the snake says, "You won't die", why wouldn't they believe it? The fruit looks delicious. And besides, why would God NOT want them to know right from wrong, good from evil?

They are about to learn...

About to grow up.

Learning and growing is different from "sinning" and "falling."

When Eve decides to eat the fruit, and when Adam likewise accepts, they are, for the first time, acting independently. From now on, the human/divine relationship will cease being one of puppet/puppeteer. Now Creator and Earthlings will develop a real, voluntary relationship of give and take... and of choice. Human independence itself is not sin. it is coming into the fullness of what humanity is meant to be.

Free.

As humans today leave childhood they gradually take on responsibility as ethical adults. About the time we realize the difference between right from wrong, we begin to also acknowledge gender differences, and recognize sexual instincts. Images of nakedness, even in infancy, to coming of age tweens can produce those feelings of awkwardness and even shame that I felt that day in 6th grade. The narrator refers phase of life as “eyes being opened”.

After the scene with Adam, Eve and the snake, an anthropomorphized God enters the picture. There’s some noise involved— rustling grass; they hear God pass? Or is God clomping like BigFoot tracking down these two disobeying creatures? Or is God whistling a happy tune? The details don’t matter. God is present. God is communicating with God’s Creatures.

When they hear God out for an evening stroll, Adam and Eve hide. It’s not that they are embarrassed about their low-couture fig leaves. They hide because they realize God will know that in covering them-

selves up, in feeling shame, in having their eyes open, they have disobeyed and eaten the forbidden fruit. They are ashamed and they are afraid.

And so they engage in something oh so typical of human behavior. They pass the buck. When God confronts them about eating the fruit, Adam says, "The woman made me do it." As if that wasn't enough, Adam points his finger at God, and adds, "And you gave me the woman". Eve says, "The serpent made me do it." God doesn't buy it. Neither do most parents. Or spouses. Or friends.

Now the story teller turns to consequences. For God to have integrity and ever be believed again, there must be. The ancient writer shifts into the genre of "Origin Stories". In this case responding to the silent questions of curious humans: "Why don't snakes have legs?" Why is pregnancy risky and childbirth painful?" "Why are men dominant over women?" "Why is farming so tiring?" "Why do I sweat?" "Why are there weeds in my wheat field?"

The so called curses should not be heard as punishments PROscribed by an angry vindictive God but they are DEscribing what the ancients saw and attributing those realities to God's actions in a story.

Notice that Adam and Eve don't die poisoned, foaming and spasming beneath the tree — in a sense the snake was correct. God backs off from the ultimate threat. However, they can no longer live in the garden. They have chosen to leave the innocent protective world of childhood and must engage with the adult world beyond which includes death. They no longer have the possibility of immortality the Garden's Tree of Life offers.

Growing up, becoming adults introduces an awareness of death and existential angst. I will cease to exist. Those I love will cease to exist. Loss hurts. Very small children do not fear death or even become aware of its existence. One small child I know was trying to comfort his mother in her tears about the death of his dog (whom Mommie had said was in heaven so as to comfort the child) saying "It's okay, Mommie, he's in heaven with Jesus. He's okay!"

Adam and Eve experience exile— and the ancient story tellers knew something about their how an exile feels because of their own exile to Babylon. They have learned by trial and error and consequences and pain. It is not good not to trust God!

But... Here in this chapter so often believed illustrate God's fury about human sin we find God struggling to love God's beloved creatures even when the facts in front of God suggest death.

Open your eyes to God's graciousness:

+Grace comes first as gift of sustained life rather than immediate death.

+And Grace comes symbolically as Divine tailor; animal skin outfits them in clothing more substantial than wilt-able scalloped fig leaves.

+ And Grace doesn't send the human ones out of the garden and remain inside. God goes with them into their adult adventures, their decision making, their next failures, their suffering as they negotiate the world. They have not and will not be abandoned although they are

East of Eden, having to grow food, find shelter, make clothing, raise a family, deal with jealousy, fear, death.

And that's where we are today. God asks for our trust. We often choose to trust another. But in Grace, God doesn't cast us aside, but rather allows us to be free. And that's good.

There is a midrash— a story told by rabbis to answer unanswered questions in the Biblical text. in this case, what happened to Adam and Eve after they left Eden and what did they think of living with the struggles they found:

Many years after they left Eden, Adam and Eve found themselves living in a cave on the side of a mountain, overlooking a fertile valley, where Adam farmed. At the end of a long day, Adam sat in the mouth of the cave with Eve, after having eaten their supper. Their children were playing. There Adam sat, tired, sweaty, not terribly clean, clothed in animal skins. and as he looked out, he said to Eve, "this is what we were made for. And it is good."

And it was.