

Feb. 10, 2008
Gen. 3:1-7; Mt. 4:1-11
First Parish UCC Brunswick
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A Tempting Story

Last week Susan Fitzgerald led us in a litany of the story of Creation from Genesis 1. Each time she said, “And God proclaimed...” we responded, “That’s good!” One time when I did this litany with a group in the past, the next week a mother told me about how she and her young daughter had retold the story at home a couple of times because her daughter (who was a pre-reader) enjoyed having her part in the story. Then one morning when her daughter wanted to stay in bed and was resisting getting up, the mother, with a spark of imagination, began, “There was darkness everywhere. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light. And God proclaimed...” To which the daughter responded, “That’s NOT good!”

What a great way to play with a biblical story and make its meanings connect with the realities of our lives! This young girl was on to something. As wonderful as creation is, there are times when life definitely feels **not** good. The reality of the tension between affirming a good creation and the simultaneous awareness that all is not right with the world led our ancestors in faith to tell stories about this tension, such as the two stories we have heard this morning – the story of Adam & Eve and the serpent, and the story of the temptation of Jesus.

This morning I’m going to focus on the story from Genesis and then make a few brief comments about the gospel story. The story of Adam and Eve and the serpent is a ‘loaded’ story for us. I can feel some of you grinding your teeth already. There was a time when I could barely read this story, but I have to tell you I have come to have deep appreciation for it. Yet, I don’t expect you

to feel the same way. I will trust you to discuss all the facets of the story that I don’t touch on with your family and friends in the coming week.

Let me begin by saying, that for me this story is just that - a story, a powerful story, but a story nonetheless. For me, it is not a video camera account of early history. It is a symbolic story that weaves together some of the challenging realities of human existence. It addresses questions and concerns that are as relevant for us today as they were thousands of years ago.

Bill Moyers in his book *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (pg. 39), writes, *My mother used to leave her freshly baked sugar cookies right in the middle of the table, warm and inviting but forbidden until supper was over. If she meant the temptation to be a test of discipline, to build character, my brother and I often flunked. I think of this when I hear the story of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Why didn’t God place the forbidden fruit on the very top branch, beyond the reach of innocence? Genesis confronts us with many tempting questions.*

As Bill Moyers alludes, God didn’t do a very good job of baby-proofing the garden. Although on the surface, the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent may be relatively simple, it doesn’t take much scratching to begin to uncover numerous subtle and profound questions and concerns about this story.

In much of Christian tradition this story has been referred to as “The Fall.” It’s significant to note that the language of “fall”

doesn't occur anywhere in the Hebrew scriptures. In fact this story is never mentioned again in the Old Testament. It is only in post-OT interpretation both in Judaism and in Christianity that this metaphor emerges. And it has gained much more prominence in Christian reflections.

I want to look at this image of 'fall' because it has been so prominent in our tradition. But instead of just considering 'fall' from one perspective, I want us to take the image and consider it in three different ways.

- falling **down**
- falling **up**
- falling **out**

(Thanks to Terence Fretheim who suggested these variations of the "fall" metaphor in his reflections on this story in *The Interpreter's Bible*, v. 1, p.367)

The traditional use of the metaphor "fall" has been in the sense of "falling **down.**" The focus here is on disobedience. In this respect the story is very much a story of a parent and a couple of kids who have come under the influence of the wrong sort in the neighborhood. I think you'll recognize our own experiences in this version of the story that someone sent me. (*author unknown*)

After creating heaven and earth, God created Adam and Eve. And the first thing God said was:

"Don't."

"Don't what?" Adam replied.

"Don't eat the forbidden fruit," God said.

"Forbidden fruit? We got forbidden fruit?"

Hey, Eve, we got forbidden fruit!"

"No way," said Eve.

"Yes, Way!"

"Don't eat that fruit!" said God.

"Why?"

"Because I said so!!" said God, beginning to wonder if maybe it would have been better to have stopped after making the

elephants.

A little while later God saw the kids having an apple break and was angry.

"Didn't I tell you not to eat that fruit?"

the First Parent asked.

"Uh huh," Adam replied.

"Then why did you?"

"I dunno," Eve answered.

"She started it!!" Adam said

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did NOT!!"

Having had it with the two of them, God's consequences were that Adam and Eve should have children of their own.

This struggle with disobedience is embedded in our human experience. We're aware of not only our children's disobedience but also our own. The Apostle Paul wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

This story never mentions the word 'sin' directly, but it is speaking about the brokenness that is sin. In the Hebrew Bible sin is generally seen as a deed that we are capable of atoning for, through repentance, changed behavior and sacrifice. However, by the time of the early Christians some people came to see sin not as a deed but as a condition. In relationship to this story, that was particularly true in the writings of the 4th century theologian Augustine who went so far as to insist that Adam and Eve's sin so infected the human capacity for moral choice that we can no longer choose not to sin. Thus, the idea of 'original sin.' (Elaine Pagels, "On Adam, Eve, and the Serpent," *Talking about Genesis: A Resource Guide*, by Bill Moyers, pg. 39)

Yet, it is limiting if we only view this story from that perspective! One person who

takes great exception to Augustine's interpretation is Rabbi Harold Kushner. You may know him as the person who wrote, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. In his book *How Good Do we Have to Be?* (Chapter 2 "What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?") Rabbi Kushner suggests that we would be wise to look at this story not as Paradise Lost but rather as Paradise Outgrown. In this way he turns the metaphor of "fall" on its head and alludes to a "falling **up**," if you will – a necessary 'growing up' that involves all the skinned knees and bruised hearts of any 'fall.' Would we want our children to never grow up, to stay embedded in the innocence of childhood that only some children have the privilege to experience?

So maybe when God told Adam not to eat of the fruit of the tree, it was more a warning than a prohibition. Kind of like when a friend says, "Don't take that job, you'll never have a life to call your own again." For Rabbi Kushner this is the story of the "the first humans graduating, evolving from the relatively uncomplicated world of animal life to the immensely complicated world of being human and knowing that there is more to life than eating and mating, that there are such things as Good and Evil." (p. 30) To be in the image of God.

We've considered two facets of the 'fall' image - "falling down" and "falling up." A third variation on the theme is "falling out." When we have a "falling out" with another person we become separated from them, alienated, estranged.

The story is full of estrangement – between humans and God, within each human, between the humans, and between the humans and the created order. In this way the story is certainly not just a "once upon a time...a long time ago" story. It is also our story and the story of every age. We know

the disharmony that exists in each of these relationships. We **know** how very complicated it is to be fully human and to know good and evil. As Carl Jung said, "All the old primitive sins are not dead, but are crouching in the ...corners of our modern hearts." (*Imaging the Word*, v. 2, p. 149)

For me it is sadly ironic that this very story about estrangement has, itself, been used and abused to instigate and perpetuate estrangement, for example between men and women. Such a reality reminds us of the truth in the story.

For a moment, I want to turn to the gospel reading and the temptation of Jesus. In the temptation of Jesus we are reminded that struggling with good and evil comes to all of us. As we grow and mature in the Spirit, sometimes those struggles even become more direct and difficult, as they did for Jesus. And, what we often think of as a definitive line between good and evil becomes more unclear. Would it be evil to turn stones into bread? Imagine how many hungry people could be fed.

I am struck by how Jesus held firm in the face of many temptations to do what would on the surface seem to be good. I am grateful for the witness that indeed he shared our common lot – knowing and struggling with temptations. In his own human experience, he knew about the various facets of the 'fall' experience.

As we continue on our Lenten journey in the coming weeks may we be encouraged and strengthened by the good news that Christ journeys with us:

- offering forgiveness when we fall down.
- offering compassion as we fall up,
- and offering the healing presence of reconciliation when there is a falling out.