



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 10, 2018

GENESIS 3:8-15; PSALM 130; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-5:1; MARK 3:20-35

NAKED, AND NOT AFRAID

Genesis 3:8-15 *[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."]*

When our daughters were very little – no more than 2 and 3 years old – we lived in San Mateo, CA, about twenty miles south of San Francisco. The weather is glorious there in the spring, with long, sunny days and a light breeze that keeps things comfortable all-day

long. The girls liked to play in our small front yard, which was somewhat raised up from the busy street, so they had a good vantage point to watch people and cars go by. But they weren't supposed to go out there by themselves.

The memory I have is of one of those suddenly sunny spring days that follows weeks of rain – a day to open the windows to the warm, fresh air and dream about the summer. Well, I was absorbed in my work at home when the phone rang. It was my neighbor across the street. She said, “Jennifer, you better go outside right now and see what your girls are up to.”

So I rushed outside, stepping over little girl clothes and diapers strewn outside the front door. And there they were, in the middle of the yard, in the sunniest spot with the steady breeze, naked – dancing around each other and laughing. They didn’t see me, or the cars slowing down on the street, or the people stopped on the sidewalk, or my neighbor in her window. They were lost in the delight of the sun and the wind on their skin and the joy of playing together.

They were naked, and they were not afraid. And I couldn’t bear to intervene; it was so lovely to see.

Our Old Testament reading today could be the most widely known story in the Bible. The story of creation of the first man and the first woman. A tale that didn’t originate as a narrative of sin and punishment but, with centuries of interpretation, became the archetypal story of the Fall of Adam and Eve. A story that cements the western symbolism of snakes as deceitful and evil. A story that casts women as untrustworthy temptresses

who lure men into forsaking their better judgement. And a story that has generated erroneous and harmful theology that the church is still dismantling. Like the idea that sexual desire is sinful and has little place outside procreation. Or the concept of an original sin that taints every human being from the moment of conception. This is a powerful story.

The part we heard today, though, isn’t about individuals named Adam and Eve. They don’t have these names at this point in the book of Genesis. The reading we heard is really about the first humans, and it is about every human. The first chapter of Genesis says, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”¹

The Hebrew word translated as humankind is “*adam*”. It’s not an exclusively masculine word, but a general word for humanity. So when we hear the story of the creation of ‘*adam*, it is a story of creation of all of humanity, including us. And it goes like this: God forms ‘*adam* from the dust of the ground, breathing the breath of life into his nostrils; and the man becomes a living being. Then God plants a garden and puts the man in it. God says, “It is not good that you should be alone; I will make you a partner.” And God makes a woman and the man sees that she is just like him, and that together they are complete.

Scripture says, “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” It is a story of intimate creativity – God’s own breath enlivens the first people – and it is a story tender relationship, as God draws them together for love and sustenance. So far, so good.

But then the first humans start to look around at all the fruit trees in the garden, especially at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which they’ve been forbidden to eat. After learning from the serpent that the tree has food that will make them wise, the woman eats the fruit and gives some to her husband, too.

Exactly what kind of knowledge they then gain has been debated for centuries. The early church saw this knowledge as moral freedom and responsibility – the maturity to make ethical and sound choices. Along with that was the understanding of creation and how all things are interconnected. As the centuries passed, the knowledge of good and evil was seen as self-consciousness, which allowed the first humans to access their inner life and spurred them to ponder the meaning of their very existence.²

By the 4th century, Augustine and other church leaders saw in this story evidence of a corrupt human nature, especially as expressed through sexuality. But there was always resistance to that narrative and the scripture itself says nothing negative about

gender or sexuality.³ It simply relates, “[When they eat the fruit], the eyes of both are opened and they know that they are naked; so, they sew fig leaves together and cover themselves.”

We need to understand that their new sense of nakedness goes far beyond physical exposure. Their eyes are opened to the weight of their own conscience, to the limits of their understanding, to their responsibility and need for each other. And that is frightening, so they instinctively try to cover themselves up. As if by disguising their bodies, their vulnerability is concealed, too.

Which is why it is so poignant when God comes to them in the most delightful time of the day, searching for the ones he carefully created in love. It is the fork in the road. The first humans are acutely aware of their fallibility and vulnerability. They have a choice to make. They choose shame.

“Where are you?” God asks. “I am hiding because I am naked and afraid,” the man answers.

And God seems perplexed at this, “Who says you’re naked? Why do you think that?” We know the rest of the story. The finger pointing, the blame, the correlation of the hardship of human life with this primal disobedience.

But let’s back up and take a look at the fork in the road, because it’s where we find ourselves

all the time. At the place where we are aware of our nakedness – our limitations, our mistakes, our fear of the unknown. The place where this vulnerability can so easily give way to shame, that grave sense of something fundamentally wrong with us.

At this fork, we must remember that there is another way. God’s creativity is not about fear and shame. It is about bearing God’s image. Remember, “God created humankind in his image, male and female he created them.”⁴ It is about love and relationship and instilling God’s presence in the world.

At this fork, we can remember our identity instead. This is the heart of the story.

Even in the midst of our messy incompleteness, we are like the first man and the first woman. We breathe God’s own breath. We bear for each other the love and affirmation of the one who made us. We dwell together in the garden of God’s creation.

We are naked, and we are not afraid.

Amen.

¹ Gen. 1:27.

² Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*.

³ Church fathers who read this Genesis story differently include St. John Chrysostom, St. Clement, and Justin Martyr.

⁴ Gen. 1:27.



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