

Anyone here been to paradise? I bet some of you have. Paradise probably goes by more common names like, Costa Rica, Hawaii, St. John's, Tahiti, JD's BBQ in Valdese. Somehow when we start talking about paradise the pace of life slows down. Paradise is where there are fruity drinks with tiny umbrellas. Paradise is where there is always a cool evening breeze to go with your front porch iced tea. Paradise is where the biggest decision of day is poolside or beach. It is a place free of cumbersome responsibilities and filled with the highest thread count you can get on your bed sheets. Words like relax, reconnect, pampered, luxury, this is the stuff of paradise. It is a place set apart, away from email but not wi-fi, am I right? Do not go home and google Bora Bora, or it will make your afternoon on Lake Hickory much less glamorous. In paradise, disappointment comes only when they run out of the chocolate pastry dessert and replace it with flan. *(And I know some of you love that, thought I can't figure out why...)*

All that is to say, that we know paradise isn't real life. Anyone who has been can tell you, even if you find paradise, you can't stay. At some point you have to come home and face reality and all your dirty laundry again. So if we are going to talk about Genesis 2 and 3 and our beginnings, let's point out again, that ironically paradise isn't real life. In fact, in this beginning, the garden starts out rather un-paradise like. Chapter 2 tells us it is dry because the Lord had not caused it to rain yet, and because there was no rain, there were no plants and even if there had been plants there was no one there, to till the ground, to help take care of them. Just last week Frank and Eleanor Freeman were telling me about germinating watermelons and why their neighbors can plant the vine as much as they want, they still won't get fruit. I'll be honest here, germinating a melon sounds a little involved if you ask me. So even if the Lord does cause it to rain, paradise won't have watermelons unless there is someone to help that vine along.

So God does what God does best, creates something out of love. God the potter starts messing in the dirt, redirects the river so there's a little mud or else this creature the divine is working on, will be all parched and cranky and there you have it. Mud and dust and breath. The first earth-creature; you know it by its more common name, Adam; which is the Bible's little word play. Adam or rather *a-dam*, comes from the Hebrew word for ground, *adam-ah*. So now that the groundling—I'm paraphrasing here of course—but now we have someone to help watermelons and squash germinate. Now things are becoming a little greener and there's at least four rivers that feed into the garden, so well now it sounds a little bit more like paradise.

Paradise needed a few birds and tigers and elephants and such, I'd like to think there were dogs because well I'm a dog person. And as nice as all this sounds well, your dog can't play cards with you. God isn't one to let thing go unnoticed and so the Almighty quickly realizes that something more is needed; it is not good for our groundling to be alone. The potter becomes a sculptor and now, now with two, Adam and Eve, well you can play cards, take care of the garden and even share a dessert if you are so inclined. This surely is paradise.

But we know that isn't the end of the story. It isn't long of course until paradise is well, what's the word? Is it tainted? Is it lost? Is it left behind?

It's funny in an ironic sort of way that what happens next dominates much of the rest of Christian theology. Funny because the garden of Eden where the creation story becomes a dramatic narrative of the human will and consequences of disobedience, well in the grand scheme of biblical story and theme, Genesis 3 is a marginal text. After chapter 4:1, Eve isn't mentioned in the Bible again. Adam's so called 'sin' is only mentioned again in the Old Testament in one verse of Job. Paul uses Adam in Romans and Corinthians as a type by way of comparison and contrast for Christ as the *new Adam, the new creature of divine making*. There is no reference to Genesis 3 in the prophets or the gospel writers. The fact is the text is simply not central or decisive to the biblical testimony.<sup>1</sup> Which is worth remembering from today.

And yet, years of theological interpretations have made it into something it is not. For instance, this story does not give us an answer as to the origin of evil. The snake is not Satan or Lucifer or any sort of fallen anything. The serpent was a clever, wise, crafty creature of God's own making. Labor pains and hard work are a consequence of life outside the garden not a punishment for eating apples or pomegranates. Who germinated those? I kid.

So consider this: going back to our original happy place; go back to your idea of paradise. If we can agree that paradise *isn't* real life, could it be that life outside of paradise, life outside of the garden *is*? The divine command and calling of our common humanity we learn in Gen. 1 is to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue and care for and participate with the land; our vocation is to care for the animals and every living thing.

Can that be done living in paradise, where there are no responsibilities or cares? I think not. Living out the divine command of caring for creation will always mean that hard work, putting a hand to the plow is involved. Ask Nancy Willingham who grows roses or William Pleasant who is trying his green thumb at blueberries—things like that take work. Just keeping the grass mown and the clover blossoms at bay is work at my house. And if you really want to talk germinating, any woman who has ever birthed a child will tell you there is no way that we could be fruitful and multiply without the pain that brings forth children. And birth is just the beginning of the pain of parenthood—for more on that wait for next week's story.

It's hard to get away from all that we have grown up with around this story. Blame Eve she ate the fruit. Blame the snake, he lies. Didn't Adam tell Eve, *hey I know you weren't created when God told me this, but that tree is off limits*. Instead of a story about the fall of humanity, a sin stains the whole of humanity from one wrong decision by a seemingly innocent couple, what if we see the story as a necessary narrative for humanity to develop authentic relationship with a loving God?

Plot twist, I used the word *necessary; a necessary narrative* to describe human maturity and freedom. We know the story well enough to know that the serpent tells the truth, at face value, when he tells Adam and Eve that they will not die if they eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

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<sup>1</sup> Celia Brewer Marshall, *Genesis Interpretation Bible Studies* (Geneva Press, Louisville, KY 1999 pg.13-14)

Having not eaten from it before, we can assume therefore that these two possess no knowledge of good and evil; which means no way to tell the difference prior to that first bite, between the consequences and moral value assigned to their behavior. They exist only a child-like innocence.

Could we have ever built ships to sail the oceans in search of turquoise colored waters had we stayed in garden? Would we have ever stepped in and helped end World War II with no knowledge of good and evil? Could we have ever mastered the art of fermenting grapes and storing them in oak barrels—you see where I'm going—had we stayed in the garden? See, I just don't think so.

Staying in the garden of paradise meant staying in state of child-like dependency. No knowledge of good and evil limits our growth and understanding of community and relationship. This story of Adam, Eve, a crafty serpent and God gives us a story about every human being's rebellion; the truth we all know all too well, that life is a pilgrimage from innocence to maturity through a land fraught with the dangers of loving and hating, living and dying.<sup>2</sup> This story of paradise gone or lost or whatever verb we might use, is a story of every person's experience of making autonomous will superior to obedience as the guiding principle of life.<sup>3</sup>

Several years ago, when we were doing retreat planning and training for our Well-Stocked Fridge Congregational retreat, we used this passage as practice. You remember that retreat, where we would practice reading scripture by finding the verbs because verbs were the same back then as they are now? If you weren't on that retreat or you are visiting, I know you are thinking, goodness you Presbyterians sound like real nerds. But during that training the deeper we dove into the text, the richer it became. I remember Cynthia Honeycutt asking, *well why in the world did God make a tree and put in the garden in the first place?* Right? Why even tempt us Lord? As soon as you bake a cake and put on the counter with the stern order to not eat it, someone will stick a finger in that icing.

Could it be, that making the tree was a gift of God's love? We see God, the creator, first reaching, lovingly into the dust—the Lord God formed a creature from the dust, from the mud and breathed the spirit of life into it's form. But God's love doesn't stop there. Out of the ground the Lord God planted a garden with every tree of every kind that was pleasant to the sight and good for food. And still the love continues. For the Lord God saw that it was not good for this creature to be alone and so the Lord makes a helper and partner a co-creature so that after a little out patient surgery and a good nap, community and relationship are the new reality.

This is the garden of our innocence. And within this garden is yet another hint of God's love. Maybe the story teller knows the garden was just a womb, because in order to really love and be in relationship with God, ***we would have to be given the choice not to***. We'd have to be able to say, I don't want that—we'd have to be given the option to rebel.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid (pg.53)

<sup>3</sup> W. Silbley Towner, Genesis Westminster Bible Companion (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2001 pg. 52)

That's how love works. Love isn't forceful. Love isn't demanding. Paul says it best, love is patient, love is kind, it isn't envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love isn't irritable or resentful, it doesn't insist on its own way. Love does not rejoice in wrong doing but rejoices in truth and it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. In order to love God, we have to be given the choice not to. Why plant the tree in the garden? Love.

In fact, what we see in this marginal story is the grand revelation of God's character, of God's being, of God's all-encompassing nature—which is love. For even when this first couple rebelled and decided for themselves that independence was worth the risk, all is not lost. Love bears all things. Surely you will not die...we hear. Even in this marginal story, death does not have the final say. Yes, Adam and Eve disobey, and we have come to recognize this as sin. Our choosing our own way and our own will, instead of God's path, leads to sin. Yes, Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden and life outside the garden will be different, harder. But the possibilities for authentic action [for living out their vocation], for choosing good over evil, those possibilities don't exist except outside of Paradise.<sup>4</sup>

A central theme in the Bible is the nature of God to extend mercy and goodness. Adam and Eve are sent from the garden, banished is probably the more common name we all remember. But leaving paradise behind allows for our vocation and calling. Leaving paradise behind allows us to play cards and bet too much money on our best hand. It allows us to plant watermelon seeds and fail at getting them to produce fruit. Leaving the garden behind, allows to see and marvel at this big wonderful world with all its heartache and joy.

So yes, they are banished and feeling pretty rotten about it. Knowing good from evil, their eyes are opened, and they see consequence of the exercise of human will. But love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Right as it is time to go, they realize how ill-prepared they are. They are like my children who when you tell them to pack, pick a pair of socks and scarf and tooth brush. Their attempt to sew together fig leaves means vocationally, someone else will be need to be the seamstress. And that someone is God.

God clothes these two creatures as they leave paradise behind, as they leave innocence behind. God knows that life outside the garden will be different, difficult but also a necessary adventure in freedom. And so, the divine potter and sculptor becomes a divine seamstress, the Lord God made garments of skin for the man and the woman, and for each and every one of us as we leave the garden behind.

But love never ends. After all, "To be clothed," Paul tells the Corinthians, "is to be given life."<sup>5</sup>

And to think, this is just the beginning of the story!

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<sup>4</sup> Celia Brewer Marshall, *Genesis Interpretation Bible Studies* (Geneva Press, Louisville, KY 1999 pg.18)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* (2 Corinthians 5:4 pg.19)