

Pentecost 3 (Proper 5) June 10, 2018 St. Augustine's In The Woods, Freeland, WA
M.K. Sandford, Genesis 3:8-15, Mark 3:20-35. 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Each and every one of us here has experienced *defining moments*. By defining moments I'm referring to events that mark turning points in our lives through the consequences they bring, insights they provide, or changes they inspire. It might be meeting the right teacher at just the right time, the discovery of a passion you didn't know you had or some random event that you witnessed that had an impact on you. Such events change the future in ways that we can't see at the time. Our scripture readings today are about defining moments, both in the human experience, writ-large, and in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Old Testament Reading for today (Genesis 3) is actually an excerpt from a second creation account that begins in Genesis, Chapter 2. It is more ancient (and different in form) than the creation account in Genesis 1.

One important reminder as we begin: it's essential to interpret scripture using the context in which it was written. What many of us have heard about this familiar story from Genesis 3 is actually based on early Jewish commentators and later from early Christian theologians like St Augustine of Hippo. In our Old Testament reading for today, the word "sin" appears nowhere in this account. Nowhere in our reading does it say women are inferior to men. I suspect much harm has come from misinterpretations of this creation account (see *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Carol Meyers (2013).

Contemporary scholars understand that this account of creation is a narrative form of folklore known as a *myth*. That does not mean it isn't true. Rather, it uses metaphor, often to explain how things got to be as they are.

Some of the characters in our myth are "archetypes." The First Man "ish" or Adam, and the First Woman "Isha," a God with humanlike characteristics (not like the very omnipotent God from Genesis 1), and a talking snake. The talking snake plays a very special role that we will get to momentarily.

As an oral tradition that explained to ancient peoples why something is the way it is, what does this particular myth do? It explained why the ancient Israelites came to live in the harsh arid highlands of ancient Palestine as agrarian pastoralists, farmers who cultivated grains, grew olive trees, made wine, gathered wild plants and herbs, and kept domesticated animals.

Such a hard life means that immediate biological family is everything. The more children you have (who can survive) the better. Children among ancient Hebrews helped their parents till the soil, care for the animals, and do other chores. Their mother's responsibilities included grinding grain and baking bread in communal clay ovens, shared with other families. When women would gather together to bake bread they formed what anthropologists call an informal network, where information was exchanged. These networks gave women informal power within the society. Women held important roles

throughout the ancient Near East, as carriers of knowledge of herbal healing, childbirth, oral traditions, and local political developments.

In ancient Israel, marriages were patrilocal: a newlywed women would leave her family and move with her husband to a location closer small village with her husband's family. This expanded kinship ties and social networks across communities.

It was in that Garden that they ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, (actually *all knowledge from good TO evil*), something that God had explicitly forbidden. They did it because of the intervention of a mythic character known as a "Trickster": the talking snake. Remember that when Isha was asked why she'd eaten of the fruit of the tree she said, "The Serpent tricked me." The serpent is a classic trickster, a character in folklore that has some very distinctive characteristics. Tricksters are very smart and knowledgeable. They have access to secret knowledge. They are very cunning. They openly mock authority. They do all these things to bring about an outcome. In this particular myth, Ish and Isha were never supposed to live in the Garden. After they have eaten of the tree, God says, "Now they have become like us."

What would humanity be like if we did not have the Knowledge of Good and Evil? Would you want to be part of such a society?

Some say this story is about the loss of innocence. And I think that is true. But sometimes the loss of innocence can be a good thing. Here, the snake as a symbol becomes important. In mythology snakes often symbolize rebirth. And, in a sense, Ish and Isha were reborn as Adam and Eve outside the garden.

At the time of Jesus' ministry, during the Roman occupation, life for the Hebrews had gotten even harder. Wealth and other resources had become concentrated into the hands of few. There was more poverty, more hunger, more disease, and more mental illness than ever.

I want to put today's gospel into context by revisiting last Sunday, when we last encountered Jesus, he'd just offended the Pharisees and Herodians by healing on the Sabbath and casting out demons, thus challenging their authority. Mark also notes (several times) that he'd been speaking with great authority. He was brilliant, charismatic and he knew a lot of stuff; people were inspired. The crowds following him grew bigger and bigger. But the Pharisees and Herodians had already decided he had to be done away with. To use a modern phrase, Jesus was already, a "dead man walking."

We also see the similarity between the trickster snake in Genesis and some of Jesus' actions. Jesus, also bearing the characteristics of the mythic trickster is creating a paradigm shift for the human family. In our reading today, the Scribes had become part of the plot to bring down Jesus, this time using slander. Acting on the adage that, If you say something about someone long enough, it will become "true," they started with charges that he himself is possessed with a demon. "He has Beelzebul. He is Satan. He is a

blasphemer. He is accused of being the polar opposite of what he was. (A technique is still used in modern politics).

I think Jesus' answer to them was among his most brilliant. His rhetorical techniques made the scribes look ridiculous..."if Satan has risen up against himself then his time has come." What is he saying? I think he's saying something like, "We're going to talk about evil on my terms, not yours. I'm the one who can tie up the strong man and then we'll plunder his house."

I am interested here in his thought pattern. Here again he is speaking with authority. He is also modeling for us a way to work through a heated moral dilemma. One has to be capable of thinking about thinking to answer charges with this much logic, passion and composure.

As the crowd gets bigger, so big that he and his followers cannot even eat, he goes into a house and he's surrounded by his followers. And, somebody walks in the door and says, "Your Mother and brothers are here". And he says, "Who is my family? Whoever does the will of God is my mother or sister or brother? What's he saying?"

I think he's saying, "This is it. This is what I'm about. The movement has begun in which love of stranger is equivalent to love of kin. This is the way forward; there's no turning back now."

He is taking the ingenious act of re-visioning "family," taking it out from the exclusive realm of biological kin (in a place where biological family is everything) to the realm of a inclusive community with a higher purpose: doing the will of God. In the coming days and weeks what it means to discern the will, the heartfelt desires of God, will become clear. His followers don't yet know it, but he is building a community based on love.

And in the coming days of Jesus' ministry we know that there will be moments of joy and insight, as well as moments of frustration, times of doubt, sorrow, death and grief. Yet, we are part of a Beloved Community, an inclusive community, a peaceable kingdom.

And that I think is what the apostle Paul offers to us today. With the words, and "So we do not lose heart," Paul reminds us by thinking and acting, or in his words, "believing and then speaking" we are part of something that is much bigger than ourselves, much bigger than any one individual, something that is eternal, grounded in the something that will prevail, a "building from God."

That building is home to the "First Family." It's home to all the ancient Hebrews who crossed into the Promise Land. But it's also home to all the new, inclusive family that Jesus built on bonds of love. And on this Sunday morning, my brothers and sisters, that is hope enough for me.

And the people said...AMEN.