

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 5. June 14, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton - on Genesis 3:8-15, and Mark 3: 20-35

I'm glad it was a serpent - a snake - that talks in the Old Testament reading because - you know - if it were a talking dog or horse that would be ridiculous!

Which is to say that we are not meant to take this story literally! It is a story of origins. In fact, the Genesis story is fundamental to what it means to be a human being! It is the answer to that cluster of archetypal questions: "where did we come from?" "Why is the world the way it is?" and perhaps, too, "who am I?" In answer to those questions the story teller must have paused and said "'This is how things got to be the way they are."

This is a different type of story to the First Creation Story, which is about the goodness and orderliness, the holiness of creation, and while that First Creation Story continues to underpin both Jewish and Christian understandings of creation, it's this Second Story that seems to resonate more – perhaps because we humans have a bigger role!

For St. Paul, this Second Creation Story was central, with Jesus as the Second Adam, reversing the Grand Mistake of the First. The Snake and the Apple continue to resonate, along with the perfect beauty of the Garden and the way human beings screwed it all up!

Here are the themes of our lives – beauty, love, the desire for knowledge, personal relationships, the forbidden fruit, betrayal, exile, pain, and loss– they're all there in living color.

Above all, though, it's because of the great theme of struggle between Good and Evil for the soul of humanity that makes this story so memorable.

Things begin well. There's the perfect couple, living in harmony amid the beauty of the Perfect Garden, and all is fresh and right with the world. Too good to be true?

What is it that goes wrong? Who could want more than this? I think we all might say that in the greater scheme of things we would all want more! Either because this sort of perfection seems just a little bit boring, or because when we're told we can't have something we want it all the more – or both – the Garden is a recipe for disaster!

If there's nothing left to strive for, or there's something that's placed intentionally beyond our ability to grasp, we humans are going to resist, want more, want something different – that's who we are, isn't it?

So if this perfection were the opening to a movie then we all know that something is about to go very wrong!

Here comes the classic villain - the snake! Snakes are actually neither good nor evil, they're just, well, snakes. Yet if you call someone a snake, you're not being nice! In western culture the snake has come to serve for the great archetype for The Insidious Trickster, offering the great gift we

human beings always seek: knowledge. That quest for knowledge stands behind some of the greatest victories we humans have achieved, and some of the greatest disasters we've perpetrated – from a cure for many diseases, to nuclear weapons and the destruction of this planet's climate.

And the snake's other promise – a bold-faced lie, as it turns out – is also at the heart of much human striving: how to not die. What is the elixir of youth? Can't we find some way to cheat death – if not permanently, at least for a little longer?

The gift of knowledge is a two-edged sword. With self-awareness comes guilt, shame, blame, and all of the other human emotions that do more to separate us from one another than to unite us. And it's that separated-ness, that distance between each of us, that this story points to as the real human sin.

We have shattered perfection's vial, and released human toxicity on each other and our planet. Who wouldn't want to cast us out when they figured out what we've done?!!

The gospel offers a reversal of that great story of loss and separation. In the face of accusations that Jesus does good things by the power of evil, he replies rather caustically with examples that beg to be preceded with a phrase like "How Could You Be So Dumb?!" Such a thing as was being claimed, Jesus says, is simply impossible – a kingdom divided against itself can't stand. Good acts are the products of good people.

And good acts, Jesus is saying, can help repair the damage done by bad acts – like the actions of Adam and Eve. If creation can be damaged, if human relationships can be severed, by humanity's toxic grasping for knowledge and power, it can also be restored.

The way that creation is restored is, according to Jesus, by doing the will of God. That, of course, was the great failure of Adam and Eve, they violated the will of God. When we do the will of God relationships are restored, a new family is created, or perhaps more accurately, an old, broken family is restored.

Restoring the family of creation is what lies at the heart of pretty much every religion's core message. For us as Christians it gets described in multiple ways – the great codes of the Old Testament, like the Ten Commandments, or like Micah's 3 – do justice, love kindness, walk in Godly humility) offer ways in which we can live that will seek about restoring the family of creation.

And Jesus himself repeats those commands – justice, compassion, relationship, family, humility, worship – as the tools by which we can begin the process of being restored.

It's no accident that these readings come so early in the season after the sacred celebrations of incarnation, resurrection, and Spirit-gift. They're reminding us of the work that we have to do if we embrace the core of those celebrations, work that, if done well, will help heal creation's wounds, which – of course – include our own.