

Proper 5, Year B
Genesis 3.8-15
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Blessed be the Name of God

Today, in the third chapter of Genesis, we are graced with one of the great stories in our biblical repertoire, at least part of a great story. It's a story upon which much later theology has been built and on which countless sermons have been preached, to which list I intend to add one more. I know we have just heard the story read to us, but I'm going to review it anyway, in some detail. You'll see why as we go along.

The time in which the story is set is the beginning of creation. The seventh day of creation has come and gone. The Man and the Woman are in the Garden, the place where they were brought into being. Our story begins with these two, our First Parents, moved by a particular sound. The text reads, "The man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze..."

Now we notice, by this account, the Man and the Woman have gotten married—"The man and his wife"—and we may wonder in passing how and when this happened, but that is the least of our wonders. We are told that the LORD God, the maker of all things visible and invisible, maker of darkness and light, is taking a stroll in the garden in the evening breeze. We are not surprised when the story tells us that the Man and the Woman "hid themselves...among the trees of the garden." Indeed! Then follows one of the most marvelous conversations reported anywhere in Holy Scripture. [We will be aided in this by the St. Augustine's Players, who stand.]

The LORD God said: "Where are you?"

The Man replied: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

The LORD God said: Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

The Man answered: “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.”

From this point, and beyond our reading for this morning, the story goes on to explain why childbirth is so painful and to detail the expulsion of the Man and the Woman from the garden to a place where they must work the land. Clearly, what we have is only part of the whole narrative, but it is enough.

I am particularly captivated by the final exchanges, perhaps the primordial instance of passing the buck. “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree...?” “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit...and I ate.” “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” Quite enchanting. Too bad for the snake that there wasn’t some way of blaming the tree itself!

I graduated from Seminary in 1967. The seminal book published that year, the book that caused young seminary graduates like me to pay attention, was a book written by the Harvard theologian, Harvey Cox. Two years before, in 1965, Cox had written a book entitled *The Secular City*. This book was a best seller in all the relevant categories. It challenged readers to awaken to the secularization of society and the likely demise, perhaps necessary demise, of the notion of a Christian America, or even a Religious America. This book surfaced in the era that also gave us the prospect of the death of God.

The second book, the one published to honor my graduation from seminary, was engagingly titled *On Not Leaving It to the Snake*. The clever ones in the house this morning will know where he got the title! On Not Leaving It to the Snake!

If we look again at our story, we will see what Harvey Cox saw and what prompted him to write what he wrote. The Man and the Woman had been told how to live in their idyllic setting. They had been surrounded with abundance and given stewardship of it. Their task, simple as it was, was to live abidingly in the way that the LORD God had set before them, to live abidingly in the way that the LORD God had set before them. This, clearly, included both things to do and things not to do. It was this latter, things not to do, that caused the problem, when they did what they ought not to have done. But surely, the LORD God being the LORD God, from the beginning there was doubtless the expectation that something would go amiss.

Here I'm reminded of a poem I've shared with some of you, a poem by the Welsh priest/poet, R. S. Thomas. Called "Making," the speaker is the LORD God, the Creator:

And having built it
I set about furnishing it
To my taste: first moss, then grass
Annually renewed, and animals
To divert me: faces stared in
From the wild. I thought up the flowers
Then birds. I found the bacteria
Sheltering in primordial
Darkness and called them forth
To the light. Quickly the earth
Teemed. Yet still an absence
Disturbed me. I slept and dreamed
Of a likeness, fashioning it,
When I woke, to a slow
Music; in love with it
For itself, giving it freedom
To love me; risking the disappointment.
[*Collected Poems 1945-1990*, 221]

“Risking the disappointment.” That seems to be the issue in our story. The LORD God knew of the risk of disappointment. The really saddening thing was the failure of the Man and the Woman to take responsibility. They did in fact disobey and when confronted with their disobedience, they passed the blame along. They left it to the snake!

When I was writing this sermon, at this point, this very moment, my laptop went “ding.” And, weak as I am, I couldn’t help but take a peak. What I received was notice of the meeting of the Bishop’s Committee on the Environment meeting set for our parish in August. What could be a more compelling sign that I was on the right track! The next thing I was about to say was to urge us all the more to be caring of the earth!

Amy and I have lived on this Island for a little over 18 months. When we’ve been asked as to why we came here, we have invariably said, “We came here because of this Island.” We plan to live here the rest of our lives. I have never cared about a place the way I do about this Island. When I drive to church, along Lone Lake Road and Goss

Lake Road and East Harbor and Steward Road and Honeymoon Bay Road, I am more than mindful of things that other people have tossed into the grass alongside the road. Makes me very angry! Yet it's only a small suggestion of the conceivable neglect of which we are capable, for we are the Man and the Woman in the story.

Amy and I have joined the Whidbey Camano Land Trust and we are ever mindful of the work of the Beachwatchers and other valiant stewards. We value so much Ebey's Prairie and the graceful vistas provided by the farms around Coupeville, surely a sign of the preservation of creation. We are part of the regular cast of players at the Bayview Farmers' Market, where the vitality of the human spirit and the vitality of the earth are in common abundance. I know the same is true at the Coupeville Farmers' Market and doubtless so in Oak Harbor and newly so in Clinton. And then, of course, there are the trees and the mountains and the water and the birds and the deer and the bunnies, maybe not the slugs. But you all know, likely better than we, what a remarkable gift of creation this Island is. And the absolute necessity of our care for it.

Last Monday morning, while deadheading rhododendron out by the driveway and the walk, I stood in the yard outside, giving thanks for what we see of God's creation every time we come to church. I was thankful for Diana Klein and Carole Tyson whose graces give shape and encouragement to every planting, and for the other quiet souls who work our land. This small piece of our Island stands as a sign to us of what this whole Island requires. The care that this small plot of land receives and requires is a metaphor of what the LORD God expects of us, as was the expectation of the Man and the Woman in the beginning. We are expected to be good stewards of this land, this beautiful Island, and to see it into a full and vibrant future. We are responsible.

So, Dear Ones, please, I beg you, don't leave it to the snake!

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