

What Cascades?

June 9, 2024

What We Think We Know

Have you ever come to realize that something you thought you knew actually had a substantially different meaning? I'm not talking about an experience of coming to know something more deeply, but rather a 180 in the way you understand something's meaning.

This happened to me just last weekend. Every once in a while, after we have our daughter in bed, my husband and I will surf old videos from our teenage years. It's just a bit of brain candy. We usually do this after one of us has had a particularly difficult week, when the idea of tracking a complicated story line in a movie makes our brains hurt.

So last week, we were doing our video bit, and Pat Benatar's "Love Is a Battlefield" came on. Now, one of my older sisters was a huge fan of Pat in the '80s, so I knew this album forward and backward, but it was only last week, in watching the video, that I learned that the song is about sex trafficking. For forty years, I had thought that the singer just had an experience of rocky relationships, but seeing the video with 21st century eyes, it turns out, it's an impassioned cry amidst horror.

That dynamic of coming to a substantially different understanding of something comes to mind as we worship today with the Adam and Eve story. Images from our Hebrew scripture which Jeremy read for us today weave their way throughout modern culture. Advertising agencies use a bite out of an apple to imply that something is decadent or naughty, indeed sinful, Rocky Rococo's calls their vegetarian pizza the "Garden of Eatin'," and the concept of a snake as the devil appears in more movies, books, shows, and music than we could count. But the text never mentions an apple, it doesn't call the snake the devil, and the word "sin" is never mentioned.

Lest we imagine that these ideas that have grown up around the third chapter of the book of Genesis are mere trivia, I remind you of the horrors perpetrated against our LGBTQ community with the code language of "It's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," and the tentacles of misogyny that radiate out from the misportrayal that "the fall" is the first woman's fault, and somehow therefore it is all women's fault that we no longer exist in paradise. Two thousand years of Christian interpretations of this text even lead to bad theology, in which people understand God to be "a strict authoritarian whose word is final and whose punishment is swift." (Nichola Torbett)

Clearly, the story of Adam and Eve begs for a second look, or, as the T-shirt my Hebrew scripture professor in seminary gave me upon graduation said, "Eve was framed." Nichola Torbett, an activist and writer with the LGBT writers group called "enfleshed," makes a powerful argument to encourage us to try to set aside the hurtful, damaging interpretations that have grown up around this text, and to try looking at it with fresh eyes. She writes:

It begins with God coming in the cool of the day to walk with God's creation. Unable to find the human beings, God calls out for them... This is not the image of an omniscient, omnipotent God, but of a seeking God, a longing God, maybe

even a lonely God who desires our companionship, a God whose heart is broken or about to be.

In fact, Torbett notes that:

There is a tension between this loving and longing God and the cursing God who appears a moment later,” and she invites us to question, “Is this God lashing out like a parent in need of anger management classes, or is something else going on here?”

History

To start, it’s important for us to understand the historical context of the text. Just as a rainbow flag symbolizes more than just a rainbow today, and a “Mr. Yuck” sticker symbolizes more than a frowny face, snakes had symbolic meaning in several Mesopotamian cultures around the time Genesis was written. In particular, serpents were “associated with gods and (especially) goddesses in several ancient Mesopotamian religions, including three of ancient Israel’s early imperial threats, Egypt, Canaan, and Assyria. The cursing of the snake may arise from tensions with these rival powers.” (Torbett)

Knowing this, the presence and actions of a snake in this story, rather than telling a story of evil embodied, is symbolic of a threatening empire or culture – think swastika or Confederate flag. Then, instead of this story revealing what has been portrayed as an absolute truth that the creator is a punishing authoritarian, Torbett suggests:

Maybe the people’s traumatic experiences with human imperialism are projected here onto God, in much the same way that some apologists for empire have attributed the crucifixion of Jesus to God’s plan rather than Rome’s violence.

Alternative Reading

What if, rather than this being a story of the inherent sinfulness of humanity, which Augustine suggested in the 4th century, which has become the dominant reading of this story and which Martin Luther and John Calvin enshrined into Christian imagination, what if instead, this is an articulation of human longing and the damage we often do when we’re disconnected from one another and the sacred? Have you ever watched a movie or read a book in which a character said or did something that wasn’t the best course of action, but then, instead of coming clean, instead of making things right, they double down on their poor decision, and the hurt, the brokenness, the disconnection, cascades? Without the interpretation of this story as the beginning of “original sin,” cascading blame is the dynamic that we notice right away. What if, rather than being a story about disobedience (something that the first man and woman could make amends for and then be on the way toward repairing their relationship with God and with each other), what if this is a story of how playing the blame game ripples out or cascades down, causing more and more and more disconnection?

Let’s look at the text: First, the serpent doesn’t lie. It tells Eve that she won’t die from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and in fact, she doesn’t die. But, what does happen after the first two people eat is they recognize their nakedness, they recognize their vulnerability, they don’t want to be seen in the fullness of the reality of who they are, and in that they become fearful.

They then hide from God, and when God gives them the opportunity to come clean, instead of saying, “Yeah, we ate from the tree you told us not to,” Adam points a finger at Eve. “It’s her fault, not mine!” Feeding his shame, rather than taking the difficult but more relational road, he throws his wife under the bus. She, in turn throws the snake under the bus, and rather than a situation in which people have hard conversations and re-build mutuality and trust after letting one another down, we have a story of how everyone blames everyone else for their disconnection.

Resolution

So if “the fall” is less about disobedience and more about disconnectedness, more about falling to the temptation to not be held accountable for one’s actions, and instead pushing the hurt off onto someone else, our project as people of faith is to be working on the other side of that equation, to have the backbone to be honest enough to own up to the things we do wrong AND to have the character to receive others’ attempts at reparation with grace.

The great spiritual writer Frederick Buechner reflects on this passage:

If God really wanted to get rid of us, don’t you think it odd that God has kept hounding us every step of the way ever since?” If God really wanted to be estranged from us, God would not have sent Moses and the prophets, wouldn’t have rescued the Israelites from slavery, and certainly would not have become flesh and dwelt among us.

Again, Nichola Torbett writes:

In 12-step recovery programs, we often say that addiction results from a “God-shaped hole” inside of us. In this passage, I sense as well, a God with a human-shaped hole. Perhaps this story developed to explain the wrenching separation of human beings from each other and the land, plants, animals, and the sacred. Maybe what it describes is an ecosystem with big, gaping holes where we have pulled away—a love story in which the heart of the world was broken—and a Sacredness who is consistently, persistently calling us back.

Friends, the prayer that comes to me through this Genesis story of cascading blame, is that as followers of Jesus, it is our responsibility to devote our very beings to repairing those gaping holes, the wrenching separation and division. These past few years have shown us all too graphically the holes in our social fabric. I pray that the witness of our faith, both as individuals and as a church, be that healing and a different way of life are possible. May it be so! Alleluia, and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Genesis 3:8-15, Psalm 130
June 9, 2024