

East of Eden
Genesis 3:8-24
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First Baptist Church Decatur
July 9, 2017

Where Are You?

Adam and Eve have distrusted God and therefore disobeyed God. Eating forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes have been opened and they now know the experience of shame for the very first time.

They hide themselves. First, they hide themselves from each other, as we saw last week. But as our passage begins they are hiding themselves from God.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.

I have been to Israel twice, and I can tell you, it's an intense kind of hot there. The only time anyone really wants to be outside is very early in the morning and then at close of day. I remember many evenings hanging out with friends on the roof of a hotel in Jerusalem late at night, feeling that still warm but now refreshing breeze, finally not sweating for the first time all day.

It seems God enjoys a good Middle Eastern evening breeze as much as the next person, and in this story we get the impression that God, Adam, and Eve have a standing appointment to hang out each evening in the Garden of Eden. See you under the olive tree, third one down from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Oh, don't mention that tree. Because Adam and Eve have been there and disobeyed God; and because they have been there disobeying God they have broken their appointment with God for their evening breeze hangout.

In fact: ***The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.***

This is not a game of hide-and-go-seek. This is a couple who are now ashamed to meet God, who are hiding from God. But you and I know that you can't really hide from God, not for long anyway.

Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

It is a question that has resonated through the ages. Perhaps it resonates in your life. Most of us listening to this message have one time or another hid from God. We haven't wanted to open the Bible, we haven't wanted to pray, we haven't wanted to be with other Christians, mainly we haven't wanted to face God. Most of the time when that has been the case in my life it's because

I didn't want to face God and my disobedience at the same time. But God has a way of finding us when we try to hide.

Adam says: ***I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.***

For the first time, fear has entered the relationship between humans and God. Adam is afraid to encounter the God who formed him from the dust and breathed God's very breath into him. Adam is now ashamed to be naked before God, and wants to hide.

But, brothers and sisters, we are always naked before God and cannot hide. There is nowhere to hide from God. In the air, on the ground, or under the ground; North, South, East, or West, there is nowhere God is not, there is nowhere to hide from God. This would be scary if God were our enemy. But Jesus makes clear that God is not our enemy. God is like that loving Father who comes running to greet us when we stop our hiding and return to him.

God asks:

Who told you that you were naked?

Then the blaming begins. Adam says:

The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me from the fruit of the tree, and I ate.

Recall that it was only a chapter ago that Adam was celebrating: This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh! Yee haw! They got married! So romantic, the first destination wedding!

But now a few verses later Adam is blaming God for burdening him with this woman, and blaming the woman for giving him the forbidden fruit. Nice!

Eve then does her own blaming:

The serpent tricked me, and I ate.

Last week we talked extensively about the dynamics of temptation.

Here we see the dynamics of what happens after we give in to temptation – evasion of personal responsibility, blame shifting, and damaged relationships.

Adam evades responsibility for his disobedience to God. He shifts the blame to God and to Eve.

Eve evades responsibility for her disobedience to God. She shifts the blame to the serpent.

The serpent refuses to comment, referring all questions to his attorney.

Everybody's relationships show damage: Adam with God. Adam with Eve. Eve with God. Eve with Adam. And everybody's pretty down on the serpent.

Though the story never uses the word "sin," clearly this is an origin story related to sin and its consequences. *Sin* comes into view as:

--Distrust of God and therefore disobedience to God's commands

--Evasion of personal responsibility for one's actions and shifting the blame to others

--Damage to relationships between people and relationships with God.

This is all still completely true. Sin is a thing. It is real. It matters. Humanity has a sin problem. Ultimately all sin is against God, but almost always it also damages others. Sin leads to alienation from God and from others. We need help with our sin problem. All of us.

Cursed by God?

The traditional interpretation of the second section of this passage, verses 14-19, is that here a wrathful God punishes his creatures for the first time in planetary history.

vv. 14-15: God curses the serpent with his permanent position of belly-crawling and dust-licking, of being feared, loathed, and killed by human beings.

And then sad words for Eve:

v. 16: ***To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children."***

And then this fascinating and difficult line:

Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.

And then sad words for Adam:

v. 17-18: And to the man he said, ***"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree...cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field."***

And finally God says:

v. 19: ***"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."***

There is so much to say here, so many levels on which to read these lines:

At one level, this is again clearly an origin story. We are dealing with the origin of certain miseries of human life, especially as experienced by agriculturalists in a Middle Eastern context 2500 years ago -- and not so different in some contexts even today:

The misery of childbearing, in which women suffered (and suffer) so greatly, often losing their lives to bring forth new life;

The misery of women's subjugation at the hands of men (wives and husbands) in patriarchal societies;

The misery of agricultural labor, eking a living out of the ground and hoping for a good enough harvest not to starve that year;

The misery of death, and the fear of death.

So as an origin story this passage answers six questions that would have come to anyone's mind in that time and many other times:

Why is pregnancy and childbirth so painful and dangerous?

Why do men rule women?

Why is the ground so uncooperative?

Why do we have to work so hard?

Why does every living thing die?

And of course: Why do we hate snakes so much? [picture from "Snakes on a Plane"?)

The most dangerous interpretation of this passage is among the most common. It is the idea that, at least as far as male-female relations go, this passage should be read as a prescription for how God wants the world to work. God wants men to rule women, because after all, it says in Genesis 3:16, "he shall rule over you."

In fact, it is possible to construct an entire theology of female inferiority and male domination out of chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis.

--The man was made first;

--The woman was made from the man's rib and brought to the man;

--The woman (supposedly) sinned first;

--The man blames the woman for sin;

--The text says the man shall rule over the woman;

--The next line says that the man is cursed because he listened to the voice of his wife.

Therefore, men should be in charge; women are morally weaker and should be adjuncts to men.

This kind of thinking became standard for centuries in Judaism and in Christianity, despite being completely foreign to the ministry of Jesus. It reinforced patriarchy, male domination, for centuries. It surfaced among Southern Baptists in 1984 in a notorious resolution that helped eventually lead to the split in the Convention.

A far better reading is this:

--Both men and women were made in the image of God and are of equal worth and dignity (Gen 1:26-27);

--Both the man and the woman were present at the temptation and both succumbed together (Gen 3:6);

--The “curses” of Genesis 3 are not normative for all time but reflect human alienation in need of redemption, just like everything else in Genesis 3;

--God’s answer is offered in Jesus Christ, who reverses the curse and heals our alienation from God and each other.

East of Eden

Our passage ends poignantly. The man and the woman do not immediately die. The human story continues. Adam names Eve, which means, “mother of all living.” God provides for human shame by providing garments of skin for clothing. Those garments could only have come from slain animals. This means that human sin has brought death into creation for the first time. Animals have died so humans might live. The pattern continues today.

God provides, but God also punishes, and sets limits:

“See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” – therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Ah, the tree of life – remember that? It was mentioned in Gen. 2:9, but not discussed. But now we see it – if they had eaten of this tree, they could have lived forever. This idea that humans had a brief shot at immortality but lost it was found in other ancient Near Eastern cultures as well.

Another theme here and in other ANE cultures is about guarding the distinction between humans and God, or the gods. The humans have already overreached once, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and now they have knowledge that is quite often too much for them. They must not be allowed immortality as well.

And then the idea from which I named my message, and John Steinbeck named his book – *East of Eden*. Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden of Eden, and the way is blocked – they can never return. Paradise is Lost. There's no going back. Adam will scratch out a living East of Eden. Adam and Eve will start having babies to populate the world. Every one of them will hurt.

What a story! Call it a parable, or an origins story, or whatever you want. But don't miss its power:

Once upon a time there was a garden. It was lush and green, with trees growing everywhere. There was plenty of good food to eat, and no one ever had to work or sweat or suffer. People and animals hung out together there, every creature naked and unafraid. God used to drop by at the time of the evening breeze and set a spell drinking fruit juice smoothies.

But we messed it up and we got exiled. We now live East of Eden. God seems to us a harsh judge. Man and woman are together but so often alienated and no longer equal. New life comes only at great pain. Work is hard and often fails. We fear animals and they fear us, and people and animals kill each other. Life is short and people die. We are not in paradise anymore.

We need someone to rescue us. We yearn for that day when:

*God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
Mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
For the first things have passed away.
--Revelation 21:4*

*Wretched [people] that we are!
Who will rescue [us] from this body of death?
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!
--Romans 7:24-25*