

GOD AND HUMANITY

The biblical narrative of *Adam and Eve in the Garden* is one of the best-known passages in the Old Testament, perhaps even in the entire Bible. Unfortunately, it is also easily misunderstood and misinterpreted. Through the centuries, it has been a source of speculation about God, the world, and human beings.

The narrative itself has usually taken a back seat to the broader debates concerning the historical origin of sin in the world, the incapability of human beings to do good, and the historical reliability and accuracy of the details of the account. The story with which we are so familiar, has lost its freshness and vitality; and so it has lost its ability to grip us with its marvelously simple message about God and humanity.

If we could suspend, for a moment, what we think this passage is supposed to mean, perhaps we could regain the power of the story itself and hear its message anew. If we listen, this is a story that pulls us into it – helps us see ourselves, and God, in a new light.

This is a story about who God is, who we are as human beings in God's world, how we respond to God, and how God responds to us. It is a story about the human condition – a story about us – a story that confronts us with who we are in relation to God. Perhaps in it you will see yourself standing before the forbidden tree, torn between obedience to God and freedom to choose your own way.

It has been suggested that these verses contain what might be called the contract of employment between God and humanity. God hands to humanity the task of tending and guarding the garden. The remuneration is the fruit of which the garden abounds and only one tree in the middle – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – is out of bounds. Humanity is confronted with a choice: to work for God and find happiness and freedom in serving God or to go its own way and live with the inevitable consequences. This fundamental choice faces us all: between God and ourselves; between real freedom and the illusion of it; between Paradise and Hell; between life and death. It is our choice, it is free will. The temptation is "to be like God", to usurp God's prerogative.

In the first three chapters of Genesis we have two different accounts of creation – they come from different sources and stress different images. It is as much of a mistake to focus too much on those differences as it is to try to collapse them into one story. The community of faith has placed these two stories together in the canon, so we must hear them together.

First we need to remind ourselves of some important points from the creation story of chapter one – God as creator. Throughout most of her history, Israel struggled against the prevailing polytheistic religions of its neighbors. To a people who were used to hearing creation described in terms of the myth of Baal, in which the world was created almost accidentally as the result of a battle among the gods, this account is a bold and powerful statement of faith. It declares that God and God alone is Creator.

It is God who controls the cycles of nature; who calms the raging deep and brings order and stability to the world. Creation is deliberate and purposeful, willfully done by God alone.

The entire account describes God as setting boundaries and limits on creation. Boundaries are set between light and dark, between waters above and below, between sea and dry land. These two concepts, seeing the world in terms of either order or chaos and seeing God as the Creator who sustains the world by setting limits and boundaries in divine creation, are crucial as background for understanding the second story of creation.

Verse four of Genesis 2 establishes the barrenness of the earth in the absence of God's creative activity and confirms God as the only Creator. Creation is not complete without humanity because there is *no man to till the ground*. The man is created first and the world is then created for him; he is at the heart of creation. This underscores the commission given to humanity *to be responsible for* all creation. Creation is given to humanity to hold in trust.

While the first creation story focused on God it quickly becomes apparent that humanity is the concern of this story. It describes how relationships are broken by the deliberate disobedience of the humans to whom God has given exclusive but limited oversight of the garden.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

The man is to care for and keep the world in which God has placed him. He is neither to withdraw from the world nor to look at it as evil and a place from which to escape. He is to take active responsibility for it. Humanity is expected to share in God's work in the world. Creation is seen as the direct work of God, and is therefore good.

The man is given permission to eat freely of any tree in the garden. Humanity is given freedom to live in God's world, to carry on the activities necessary to maintain life. But this freedom is not absolute. There is a limit placed on the man, one tree from which he may not eat. Here the idea of boundaries, emphasized earlier, is again brought forward. Just as boundaries exist to define the physical world, so boundaries exist to define human existence in God's world. And there is a firm warning embedded in the prohibition, a consequence of crossing the boundary.

As we listen to the story here, our immediate question is, why? Why are there boundaries in God's world? The question is not answered in the story and actually plays no part in it. There is only the fact of God's boundaries. God sets the boundaries of existence in creation; God determines the order of the world. It is the task of humanity to recognize those boundaries and live within them.

Now we begin to see ourselves quite clearly in the story – it becomes our story, for we do not like limits and boundaries. Maybe the fact that we tend to focus on the one prohibition, the one forbidden tree, reveals something important about us. We too frequently see God as the One who prohibits. But God is also the One who permits. Why don't we ask about all the other trees that are permitted? Why does the prohibition bother us so?

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

There have been so many interpretations of this verse that it is easy to lose our way amid the clutter of speculation and theories. One of the most common interpretations is to identify the serpent with the devil or Satan. But that is not what the scripture says. In fact, nowhere in the Old Testament is such identification made.

The focus of this story is not on the serpent and his trickery but on the man and the woman. We must leave them at the center of the story. To do otherwise would be to shift the story away from the responsibility of the couple and place it on the serpent. We seek to blame the serpent's trickery and temptation for the humans' disobedience. We want to find an excuse for the disobedience of the couple – to shift the blame away from them – away from us. It is easier to externalize blame for wrong decisions to someone or something else rather than to take responsibility ourselves. "The flesh is weak." "Society is to blame." "I was overwhelmed by circumstances." "It really wasn't so bad." "The devil made me do it." All are cheap and immature ways to avoid facing our own failure.

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"

As the woman quotes the command of God, indicating that she knew exactly what the boundaries in God's world were, she subtly but significantly distorts it. She adds that they may not even touch the tree. She has twisted the command into a legalism, to an almost unreasonable demand – so much easier to violate! Perhaps this is evidence of a desire to be like God, defining what is and what is not allowed.

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

The people are lured by the promise of absolute freedom, the ability to become gods. As such, they would have no boundaries except those of their own making. Once again we are drawn into the story since we too often long to be free of restrictions and limits, free to choose our own way with no consequences. We simply do not like boundaries. But as the story unfolds the promise is empty and false, a product of human selfishness and a destructive desire for independence and autonomy.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

The couple now stand outside the boundaries of God's purpose and have taken life itself into their own hands. They knew the order that God had established in the world, they knew what the penalty was for violating it, and yet they willfully chose to act contrary to it. The choice between good and evil, right and wrong, creativity and destructiveness is always ours to make. Ours too is the responsibility for making that choice and being accountable for the consequences. The story is not about the origins of evil. Rather it deals with its consequences.

Sin is our perversion of the gift of freedom, the infantile grasping of choice to ourselves, the refusal to turn away from our self-oriented desire for the one forbidden tree and "grow up" into responsible, God-oriented and other-oriented persons. Immediately the couple's well ordered harmonious world begins to disintegrate. There is no more talk of tending the

garden. There is no more walking with God in the garden. There is only mistrust, blame, guilt, and alienation.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Here is a second reference to the nakedness of the couple. At one point the couple is described as naked and unashamed, but now their nakedness causes distress. They have crossed the boundary of God's order in the world and disobeyed. Nakedness here becomes a powerful symbol for the shame and guilt of disobedience. The couple's attempt to cover their nakedness with crude garments of leaves depicts the feeble and futile efforts of human beings to address the guilt of sin.

As the story continues from our reading this morning a widening circle of disruption caused by disobedience is described. The couple finds that they have lost the capacity to relate to God in the way they did before. Their shame and guilt cause them to try to hide from God. God comes to have fellowship with them but they are afraid of standing naked and ashamed before the Creator on the wrong side of the boundary! There is nothing there but death.

The command of God, the boundary set by God in the world, carried with it a consequence: *in the day that you eat of [the tree], you shall die.* The couple knew the penalty of crossing the boundary, of trying to live life outside God's order, yet they chose to violate it anyway. At this point in the story we would expect God to carry out the threat. Justice demands it.

But here we learn that God is more than a God of justice bound to a law of judgment and retribution. God does not carry out the death penalty. God chooses to exercise divine sovereignty for the good of creation and for humanity. God simply chooses to offer forgiveness rather than impose what divine law requires. God is not "just" in this story, at least not by any external standard of legal justice. This willingness of God to be "unjust" in order to reclaim creation is the definition of grace.

Here is a profound affirmation of the nature of God. God responds to disobedience, not with the full weight of justice, but with mercy and grace! **Amen.**