

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7
Romans 5: 12-19

THE TREE IN THE MIDDLE

In Asubels Treasury of Jewish Folklore, there is the following story: A fox looked up into a tree and saw a crow sitting on the topmost branch. The crow looked mighty good to him, for he was hungry. He tried every wile to get him down, but the wise old crow only leered contemptuously down at him. Foolish crow! the fox said. Believe me, you have no reason to be afraid of me. Dont you know that the birds and beasts will never have to fight again? Havent you heard the Messiah is coming? If you were a Talmud scholar like me, youd surely know that the Prophet Isaiah has said that when the Messiah comes, the lion shall lie down with the lamb and the fox with the crow, and there shall be peace forevermore.

As the fox stood there speaking sweetly, the baying of hounds was heard. The fox began to tremble with fright. Foolish fox! croaked the crow pleasantly from the tree. You have no reason to be afraid, since youre a Talmud scholar and you know what the Prophet Isaiah said. True, I know what the Prophet Isaiah said, cried the fox as he slunk off into the bushes, but the trouble is those dogs dont! We yearn for peace but it keeps eluding us both within us and around the world. We desire harmony (after all, the Messiah has come!); yet, we still live in disarray and discord. We strive to live orderly lives but, at times, chaos enters into the equation. We live with this hope for a perfect and peaceful world, but the reality is that paradise has been lost and it seems beyond our grasp at least in this earthly life.

Why, how, when, where did it all go wrong, and, can what is broken be fixed or restored? If Im not mistaken, these are some of the questions that are behind the scripture lesson from Genesis. Let me say upfront, I think there are more questions raised here than there are answers within the biblical narrative. And, I dont have all the answers. In fact, I have fewer answers than I did when I was younger and heard and understood this text in more concrete, black-and-white, cut-and-dried terms. However, as I get older, I find that I am okay with not having all of the answers nailed down. Im more content to live with mystery; and, in my not-knowing state of mind, I find that I am more willing to try and trust God for what I cannot see or understand.

First of all, I think the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden is just that - a story. Its a story told to understand the world, whats good about it and what went wrong with Gods creation. Its a story that tries to make some sense of the human condition. Adam, in the Hebrew language, means human being or man, and Eve is Hebrew for woman or partner (certainly not servant!) to the man. In this regard, the story is a story about each and every one of us.

Its important to note that this story of Adam and Eve follows the creation story in which God saw and pronounced every created thing as being good; even more, after creating humankind in Gods own image, God saw everything and exclaimed it was very good! At the same time, evil is already present in the world. Whether evil is actually found within a crafty serpent, which is able to speak to the woman, or the serpent represents an inner voice that whispers and tempts and seeks to undermine, I do not know. The text doesnt attempt to explain the presence of evil; it simply notes that evil is already in place. My finite understanding is this: if God truly created us to freely love God, then there

needs to be a choice involved to love and obey God, to love yet disobey God, or to reject God totally.

The choice between good and evil, between following God or not, is depicted in the story by Gods command to 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. Again, I dont fully understand whats at stake with the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Perhaps it means that Adam and Eve will be able to experience, for the first time, not only what is good but also what is evil or bad in the world such as disappointment, illness, depression, disharmony, anxiety, grief, and so on.

Besides setting up a choice, I think the placement of this particular tree in the middle of the story and the garden informs us that God is God and we human beings are not! God is the Creator and we are creatures; thus, there are certain things that God alone knows and understands that we do not and cannot know period! If I try to clarify that statement any further, I would recall those times when we were children and our parents said to us, You cannot, must not do that - simply because I said so, and thats final!

At the very least, I think this tree in the middle serves as a definite reminder to all human beings that while we have a great deal of freedom to choose, we do not have absolute freedom. While we are free to choose to obey God (or not!), we are not free from the consequences of our actions if we embrace evil or fail to do Gods will. Someone has said, To say yes to God is to say yes to life. On the other hand, to say no to God is to be cut off from the source of life. If we wish to live in Gods world, it must be on Gods terms and not on ours. There can be no meaningful human existence where the boundaries that limit human freedom are not recognized and respected. Where responsible freedom is replaced by utter lack or restraint, human community and fellowship with God are no longer possible. Gods prohibition to Adam and Eve was perhaps meant to teach us this (Page Kelley, Discovering Genesis 1-24, p. 28). While the garden has certain boundaries (many dos and one dont), within these limits humans have a great deal of power and freedom unless we cross the boundary line.

And, of course, thats precisely what happened with Adam and Eve, with you and me we disobey God. God gave the command not to eat of the tree in the middle and God expected obedience. One way or another, the human beings were tempted or tested while Gods authority was called into question. The serpent lied to the woman when he told her, You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it (the tree in the middle) your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God. I think that is the crux of the matter; the temptation and the human tendency are to be like God, to place our will on an equal or higher plane than Gods will. Thats when the trouble begins and persists.

We know this story because, once again, it is our story. We know how Adam and Eve and we ourselves rebel from God, disobey Gods will, and sin against God. And, when we sin, when we follow our wants instead of Gods will, there are dire results. There is a lack of communion with and alienation from God and one another. The man and woman hid from God in the garden, and they hid from one another by sewing fig leaves together and covering their nakedness with loincloths. Peace and harmony were gone, replaced by sin, shame, and guilt. What follows is an avalanche of sin within the biblical story and human history. Thats the end of the passage for today, but its certainly not the end of the story! If we flip to the end of chapter 3 in the Book of Genesis, after the man and woman were expelled from the garden, we read this twenty-first verse: And the Lord God made garments of skin for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Despite their sins, which resulted in broken relationships with God and each other, God still loved them and refused to let go of them. God continued to show them mercy, grace and redemption. This note of Gods determination to make right once again by his grace that which has gone wrong by our sin is sounded over and over again in the Bible. Someone has said, Heres the plot of the entire Bible and the plot of this holy season of Lent in a nutshell: Gods goodness is scarred by our sin, but our sin is met by Gods persistent love.

David A. Shirey then tells the following story on himself: Once as a 7-year-old I threw a nasty tantrum. I told my mom I hated her and that I was leaving home. Before I left, I trashed my room, making as much of a mess as possible. I then stormed down the steps and headed through the kitchen on my way out the back door. My mother asked me on the way out, How about a jacket? A jacket? Why do I want a jacket? Well, if youre leaving for a while, youre going to get cold. No, I snapped. I dont want a jacket. How about something to eat? Youll get hungry. And I just made some brownies. Well, I said, Ill take a few brownies with me. And as soon as I got those brownies in hand, I walked out the back door. What I heard as I stepped off the stoop into the back yard were these words from the kitchen: I love you. Imagine that. In spite of all Id done and was still doing, she insisted on clothing me and feeding me and telling me she loved me. It sounds like the whole rest of the Bible to me From Day One right up to today the God we worship is about the business of redeeming what has gone wrong, determined to make things right. Its the story the Bible tells and its the gospel truth. (Biblical Preaching Journal, Winter 2005, p. 20) It is certainly the truth that the Apostle Paul penned to the Christians living in Rome when he compared and contrasted the old Adam to the new Adam, Jesus Christ. For if the many died through the one mans trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus, Christ, abounded for the many just as one mans trespass led to condemnation for all, so one mans act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one mans disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one mans obedience the many will be made righteous.

I find it interesting that we begin this Lenten journey by looking at the tree in the middle of the garden, and we will end the Lenten journey by focusing on another tree the tree in the middle of two bandits who were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left (Matthew 27:38). Here again, it is difficult to understand or explain what took place with that tree in the middle, only this time it wasnt in a garden (that comes three days later!) but at the garbage dump just outside of Jerusalem. However, this is the good news that is found and proclaimed within the First Letter of Peter: He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, by have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:24).

In grateful response, let us repent of our sins and give praise to God for our sins are forgiven! Let us rise up with new resolve to live faithful and obedient lives as we follow the Christ. Let us do our part to bring peace and harmony into all of our relationships - just as God has reconciled us to himself. And, let us live life on purpose, now and forever, giving glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
February 10, 2008

