

Lessons from Eden
Ash Wednesday Worship: February 25, 2009

In this evening's Ash Wednesday meditation, I will be focusing on temptation, sin, shame, and the story of the Garden of Eden. During Lent, it is appropriate for us to reflect upon our sins that lead our Savior to die for our sake on the cross. The crucified yet risen Christ calls us to repent of our waywardness. Sometimes in the church, we focus so much on God's grace that we can ignore the ugly side of human existence. But honestly acknowledging the ugliness of our sin can help us be more aware of the consequences of our actions and motivate us to follow God more closely. Listen now for God's Word for us this night from Genesis 2 and 3.

Genesis 2:15-18, 22-25 & 3:1-7:

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." Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as a partner."

And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

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'?" 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.'"

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." 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. 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.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God!**

God sees that it is not good that Adam is alone in the Garden of Eden, so Eve is created. Adam and Eve live in peace and harmony with each other, the animals, and God. They can eat food from whatever tree they want, except for one: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All of us know about the allure of temptations, so someone

who has never heard this story before can guess what happens next: Eve gives into her curiosity.

In New York City in the 1990s, a small-time crook would mug old women and take the cash from their purses. He eventually got caught after he mugged a ninety-four-year-old woman, Yolanda Gigante. As the police officer was taking the crook to jail, the criminal learned that he had mugged the wrong person. You see Yolanda's son was Vincent Gigante, head of the most powerful mob family in New York City. The mugger was stunned, slumped down, and knew that he now was in big trouble. When we sin, the results are unpredictable and sometimes we get more than we bargained for!

We face large and small temptations every day. Perhaps we are tempted by a piece of cheesecake when we are trying to stick to a diet. Or a recovering alcoholic may be tempted to go back to the bottle, even though he knows it tears apart his entire family.

If you open the newspaper, it is full of stories about people who have given into the temptation to cheat. Alex Rodriguez, the highest paid player in Major League Baseball, has repeatedly denied using steroids for years, but he was caught earlier this month. He tested positive for steroids in 2003 and has admitted using them from 2001-2003. This February, New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo has started an investigation of Merrill Lynch, which allegedly paid four of its top executives over \$120 million dollars and all of its employees over three billion dollars of taxpayer funds when the investment firm received bailout money from the government.

We are all aware of these public sins that make the headlines, but we need to be honest and admit that all of us are imperfect and sin. If we proudly think we are not susceptible to giving into life's enticements, when temptations arise we will be unprepared and will make morally compromised choices.

When the church talks about temptations, we typically bring up problems people face with their families and in their personal lives. But I worry that we, as church leaders, often neglect the important decisions our business people face week after week on the job. Those pressures are intensifying as the economy worsens. All of you who are employees face ethical issues daily on a variety of subjects including bankruptcy, tax evasion, fair pricing, debt collection, sexual harassment, and employee theft and fraud. In these tough economic times, how do you handle pressures to cut costs? Christian business people can be tempted to think that their religious world is one sphere, while their work world is another. To take our Christian discipleship seriously, however, we need to reflect upon how our faith impacts all areas of life, including our work or school life, our family, and our personal behavior.

That kind of personal reflection may have helped Eve when the serpent starts asking questions. There are many misconceptions about this serpent: many people assume that the devil tempts Adam and Eve. There is no hint anywhere in the text that the serpent is actually the devil in disguise. The serpent is simply one of the many animals in the Garden of Eden. The Hebrew word arum, which is translated as crafty or clever, is used to describe the serpent. That same word arum is used as a positive attribute in Proverbs to describe wisdom people can learn about God. Many modern readers assume that it would have been obvious to Eve that the serpent is offering a bad

suggestion, but the text shows us that there is no blatant reason that Eve should have been suspicious of the serpent.

When Adam and Eve are in the garden, the voice of the serpent says, “Would you like to be like God?” As Fred Craddock has written, “The voice does not say, ‘Would you like to live like the devil? I have a deck of cards and a fifth of vodka out here in the chariot.’ The voice says, ‘Would you like to be as God?’ What is wrong with that? Isn’t that what we are about?” I can understand why Eve makes the choice she does; she actually has good intentions: she wants to be like God.

I think Eve wants what many of us wish for: to be in control. We want God to be our advisor, blessing our plans, but that is not how it works. God is in control, not us. We need the attentiveness to notice where God is present and the flexibility to respond to what God is doing.

From the encounter between the serpent and Eve, we recognize that the most difficult temptations include those times when we are not sure what is right and what is wrong, where the difference between black and white is not clearly evident. When we face real temptation, we have the opportunity to ask God: What is your will for me? We face some of our most important questions in these kinds of situations. Where is God in my life? Are my actions consistent with my priorities? Without consistently coming to God in prayer and asking the hard questions, we are susceptible to unknowingly giving into the complex temptations that life will throw at us.

Shame follows some of our most painful mistakes, whether we have intentionally sinned or have caused harm inadvertently. Adam and Eve feel deeply ashamed, especially of their own nakedness. Some interpreters have incorrectly asserted that Adam and Eve want clothes to cover up their nakedness because they feel guilty over their sexuality. Genesis instead tells us that God gives us our bodies and our sexuality as a gift. When sexuality is expressed in healthy ways, it can be a great joy.

I think that Adam and Eve want to cover up something much deeper than their bodies. Now that they know shame, they want to hide the ugly parts of themselves. They have learned personally about sin, disappointment, and failure. So they cover up their bodies in an effort to hide the ugliness on the inside. Many of us are experts at concealing the pain inside of us. Adam and Eve being naked with one another is a symbol for knowing each other fully: with all their vulnerabilities, all their secrets out in the open, and all their pretenses put away.

Adam and Eve are terrified after they eat the forbidden fruit. In a comical and tragic scene, Adam and Eve try to hide from God. Do they really imagine that Adam and Eve can hide anywhere where God cannot find them? And that’s where I see the good news of this passage. God wants to find Adam and Eve to reconnect with them, even though God already knows about the ugliness of their sin. God is patient with them, asks them questions, and listens to their excuses, even though God already knows the answers. Certainly there are consequences for Adam and Eve’s sinfulness; they are banished from the Garden of Eden and face a much more difficult and complicated life because of their mistake. God knows their terrible secret, yet loves them still. God maintains a relationship with these two people who have disobeyed.

Is there any problem that you and I are facing that we have not shared with anyone else? Is there some pain that continues to weigh on us like a heavy chain? If so, the Lord invites us to share our secret with God through prayer. Even though we must accept the pain that our mistakes have caused, we can be reassured because God already knows these ugly parts we try to conceal and still loves us. After you have prayed about your inner struggles with God, I invite you to share your problem with at least one other person that you trust. It may be your best friend, your spouse, a teacher, a parent, an elder from this church who you respect, or one of the pastors of this church. It is not appropriate or healthy to share all our struggles with everyone, but finding healthy outlets are good for all of us.

When the Lord created Eve, God told Adam that we are not meant to live alone. Adam and Eve are able to support each other through the harsh realities they face outside of Eden. God has given us each other as companions to encourage and help each other through the hard times. No matter how tough we try to act, God knows us, even in those places where we are most vulnerable and still loves us dearly. Thanks be to God, who knows the real you and me and offers us tender mercy and care.