

The Gods, the snake and the curious woman; a sermon on Genesis 3. Rev. Rosalind Gnatt, March 5, 2017

The Garden of Eden – that mythical wonderland of perfect serenity, where vegetarian lions played happily with little lambs – a time when the gods were busy creating things; a place in a set of stories that, I can assure you, have shaped your world view.

In the first of these stories, the gods say, “Let’s make a creature out of earth (adama) that looks and is otherwise similar to us. And let’s give this earthling dominion over all the other things we’ve created. So the gods made male and female versions of themselves and told them to subjugate, dominate, literally trample under foot all of creation.” I’d say we children of these earthlings have been doing a good job of following those orders.

The second story is quite different – even God’s name has changed to the “I Am” of the gods: the Lord of the gods. The Lord, who is chief architect, who sees that there is no one around to take care of the earth. So the Lord makes an earthling and breathes into its nostrils the breath of life. Then the Lord plants a garden, both beautiful and functional, and puts the earthling in it to cultivate and to take care of it. Theologians call this the farmer’s story, in contrast to the other conquest story. The Lord tells the earthling that he is free to eat anything in the garden except the fruit of the tree of knowledge to differentiate between good and evil. This fruit, the Lord says, will kill you.

The Lord decides that the earthling needs a helper. After checking out and rejecting each animal as an appropriate mate, God puts the adam to sleep, takes one of his ribs, and fashions a female, the first human from a human, rather than human from earth. One could say, Adam was the first human to give birth – flesh of his flesh, he calls his companion.

And this brings us to the sermon text: the snake, the woman and the tree.

*The serpent was the subtlest of all the beasts the Lord of the Gods had made. One day he asked the woman, “Did the gods really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?”*

*“We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” the woman replied. “It’s only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. The Lord said, ‘You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.’”*

*“You certainly won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman. “The Lord knows that, on the day you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you, like the gods, will understand the difference between good and evil.”*

That is all the snake had to say to the woman: you won’t die. You will be able to understand the difference between good and evil. He didn’t lie to her. And, isn’t wisdom a good thing? Don’t we wish the world was just full of wise people – people who can tell the difference between good and evil? Why would the Lord of the gods tell his creatures, made in the very image of the gods, that the fruit of the tree was poisonous? Was this a worried parent trying to scare the children into leaving the grow-up things alone? I bet most of us parents have, at some time, exaggerated to consequences of some action to a child. I recall my grandmother telling my 3-year-old brother he would be electrocuted and would die if he persisted in stick the hairpin into the electrical outlet. He did it anyway and the head of my doll, which he held in his other arm, flew across the room. My doll was not in great shape,

but she probably saved my brother. And God knows, being able to discern the difference between good and evil is not enough to make life easy.

*And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasant to look at and would give her wisdom, she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to the man, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.*

What comes next is a lot of passing the buck:

*And in the cool of the day, they heard the voice of the Lord of the gods while walking about in the garden. So the man and the woman hid among the presence. Then the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" The man replied, "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked." "Who told you that you were naked?" the Lord God asked. "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?" The man replied, "It was the woman you gave me, who gave me the fruit, and I ate it." Then the Lord God asked the woman, "What have you done?" "The serpent deceived me," she replied. "And so I ate it."*

God gets angry, first at the snake, then condemning the woman to painful childbirth and finally telling the man he's going to have to work hard for a living. All in all, it sounds like the kind of exchange a parent might have with teenagers who need to face reality: getting pregnant is serious business; and people – at least most of them – have to work hard for a living.

The earthling Adam and the woman, who is named Eve – mother of all life – get animal skin clothing from God – a kind of going-away present, more durable than fig leaves. Our story ends with another conversation among the gods:

*the Lord God said (to the others), "Look, the human beings have become like us, knowing both good and evil. What if they reach out, take fruit from the tree of life, and eat it? Then they will live forever!" So the Lord God banished them from the Garden of Eden, and he sent Adam out to cultivate the ground from which he had been made. After sending them out, the Lord God stationed mighty cherubim to the east of the Garden of Eden. And he placed a flaming sword that flashed back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.*

Let's set the record straight – Adam and Eve were not expelled from the garden for their disobedience: they were expelled because the gods didn't want to share immortality with them.

This set of stories, a compilation of ancient legends, gives us a metaphor for how the human condition came to be. They are a confounding sequence of God and the gods creating some order out of chaos. Many beautiful things, plants and animals, were created – even likenesses of the gods themselves. These creatures were not immortal, but to say they lacked judgment – well, at least the woman weighed the risk and was tempted, not by immortal life, but by wisdom. She was the curious one. The man went along for the ride. Without Eve's curiosity, this story about how we got here wouldn't exist. Eden was a kind of safe and comfortable enclosed terrarium for plants and animals. But who would have ever heard of Eden if Adam and Eve hadn't been forced out of the terrarium – out of the nest.

Those of us fortunate enough to have been born to people who wanted us, who did their best to keep us safe and fed and clothed, experienced for a brief time a kind of Eden.

No wonder many of us idealize and long for our childhood days. Responsibility is a tough taskmaster. Far too many people on this planet we share emerge into life from a hungry mother's womb. Of the 842 million people on this earth, who don't eat enough to function in a normal life, fully 60% are women. 98% of the world's hungry live in developing countries, where women are the major small-family food growers.

The most enduring injustice that grew out of the creation story is the myth of Evil Eve – the one who led Adam astray, thus condemning all future humans to be born sinful. This so-called sin of Eve, I call it Eve's first decision, began to be a theme among the church leaders as the church became more powerful, and the more egalitarian pioneer days of the early congregations faded into the past. Theological justification for the lesser status of women nearly always found its roots in the conversation between Eve and the snake.

I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon that your worldview and mine has been influenced by this colorful myth. The name Eve has been synonymous with sin for 2000 years and has created a pile of clichés that just don't go away.

A friend of mine sent me an article this week: 19 things to give up for Lent that aren't chocolate. Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and I'd like to challenge this congregation to give up the following for this Lenten time of self-examination: give up using clichés. Whether it is directed at men or women, children or elderly, white, black, brown or whatever skin tone or nationality or religion or sexual orientation other people have – a cliché is never true. Never. Groups are made up of individuals. Clichés are ignorant and hurtful – they explain absolutely nothing. They are a shortcut that diminishes the speaker as well as the target group.

And the next time you hear a cliché, think of Eve – the mythical mother of the human race; the woman who was curious, who longed for wisdom; the woman whose symbolic action forced humankind to grow up and assume responsibility for the real world.

Rosalind Gnatt – March 5, 2017