

Genesis 3:1-9

The Beautiful Tree

One of my seminary professors told this story on himself, how immediately out of seminary he was excited to preach his first sermons; he studied diligently and preached, digging deeper into the scripture every Sunday. Until an elder came to him after the fourth sermon from a single text, and suggested maybe it was time to move on to the next passage. And I tell you I am tempted to preach four weeks on this passage. There is so much here, the characters have depth and complexity, each word has its own story to tell. In these first stories of Genesis are ancient, esoteric themes and some of the basic elements of mythology and fable: the image- or the shadow- of God, the breath of life, a garden, a mystical tree, secret knowledge and magical fruit, a speaking animal, fig leaves and human sexuality, eyes opening into new awareness. Now I'm not doing three more weeks, but we should understand this, that the narrators and writers of this story saw the world for what it is, and told this tale to explain human sorrow and alienation- though they knew it would not answer all their questions. Nor will it answer all of ours.

Our passage begins and ends with questions. And they demand some response from us. Even if we have our own questions, and must not be satisfied with easy, literal interpretations: that see in this story Satan and original sin- where they are not- and a flawed explanation for woman's fall to a lower status. Even if we consider this a story that really happened once long ago, or an allegory that has played out in the cultural and political circumstances in every age of humankind, and that plays out in our lives: every time that we are confronted by different worldviews, whenever our faith is challenged by new knowledge and concepts; and as we live and explore and see new things, and meet and different new people (or perhaps, quick-witted serpents?). What are we to do? Here the woman meets the serpent and she is not prepared, emotionally or spiritually, to answer his question.

He asks, "Did God say...," and she replies with the commandment God spoke to the man back in chapter two. But with an addition: she says that God commanded they must not even touch the fruit. She has made a new rule! How often does religion work that way, when we choose to add to the rules- for the best reasons, of course, another layer of protection from disobedience: if we

don't touch, we can't eat. (When I was young, it was "If you never take that first drink, you can never become an old drunk," and "If you don't dance, you won't be tempted to go further!") But then, we confuse what God has commanded with what we think God should have commanded. Adding layers of prohibition doesn't protect, it rather strips away the prohibition by lessening the power of the single word of command. I think the serpent knew he had her at this point: he tells her, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil," when already she had made herself like a little god, making her own version of the commandment. And yet, she is unable to obey even her addition to the command: she *took* the fruit, and ate; *handed* it to the man, and he ate, as well.

Right in the middle of everything, there was a beautiful tree. She saw that it was pretty to look at, desirable for making one wise, and that it was good for food. There's that word again, "good." Wasn't everything good as God was creating in chapter 1, and at the end of chapter 2, when the man and the woman were together, naked and unashamed? But we knew all along as we read the story, the tree was there in the middle of the garden, a beautiful, prohibited

thing, and a threat to the perfection of the first home. What irony for the author to call the tree “good.”

Or perhaps not. Maybe the tree is there just because good and evil are around us in everything we do and say. God made all these other trees as blessings, providing food and enjoyment, shade and shelter. And then God put this tree with them. We can't explain why. The ancient authors don't even try to explain. Did they, do we, believe that God intentionally places temptations in our way, to see if we can overcome? Or should we just admit that wrongness, wickedness, pride, selfishness, sexual temptations are all around us, and sometimes we give in, we fail. The woman, if she had been wiser, could have simply turned from the tree and not beheld its beauty, and so not disobeyed. But we are curious creatures. I think the serpent knew that about the woman. And she had no insight, no knowledge how to ward off the temptation, no answer to his question.

We have to know that this story was narrated and then written down, probably edited over the hundreds of years before the Hebrew Bible was collated and published. These story-tellers were fervent believers in this one God, and yet

they told the story in this strange, confusing manner. But the oddest thing is what's missing. At the crucial moment, *God is missing*. I think that likely the most consistent theme in all of scripture is that God is near, watching over us, loving us. But here, God is absent, at the very worst time, just as the trickster makes his move. How can that be, and why? Is God uncaring, leaving them to fend for themselves, when they are innocent and immature, unknowing? Knowledge is a good thing, the only thing that can defeat ignorance and falsehood, but they have never been taught. And God doesn't arrive until after the fact. They get their knowledge from some other source, from painful experience. See verse 8, *the expected norm is that God shares the goodness of the garden with his creatures-* what a happy thought!- but today God is missing; until he comes walking to them, and asks the second question, "Where are you?" It's also the question we want to ask of God.

Elie Wiesel has told this story of a night in the barracks of one of the death camps in WWII. When the men began to debate where is God, why is God silent in this outrage, why doesn't God see and act, where has God gone, how can God let such evil succeed? And then, a moment of quiet; they are overwhelmed by

God's silence and their own bitter suffering. And the elder, the wisest man among them, speaks, "Now, let us go and say our prayers to God."

That is the word for us, that we cannot know, that there is always good and evil around us and among us and in us- each moment, and our response is to pray, to confess that God is God; we pray: to be wise in this or that situation, to be faithful, to be strong, to be good. It is a word for this moment, for us at worship, for our coming together at the table, that even if we cannot know every mystery, God meets us here. It is our confession, that sustains us all the times we have felt lost and alone, and have sought God; here we can find hope even in God's question, because, we believe, at last God has come searching for us.

Look, nothing could be easier than this passage, if we want to take every word of the story at its literal meaning. But if we want to face honestly our own questions, to confront the sly and tempting questions of suffering- of good and evil, if we are willing to face God's great question, then we must be patient and wise, and keep on searching.

Because the story doesn't try to explain God, or God's ways, perfectly, but to describe the implications of disobedience- or shall we say, the "dilemma of human existence." The man and the woman were living joyfully and unashamed at the end of chapter 2, and now this. Whatever happened, their eyes were opened- they entered a new realm of knowing- and the first thing they knew was that they were naked: their relationship had changed- free, happy, and loving before, but now shameful and afraid. Where the last verse of chapter 2 talks of their clinging to one another and becoming one flesh, now they are divided, hiding from each other behind the clothes they have made. And hiding from God. The good world is now undone.

But God comes, questions and examines, a penetrating yet gracious query into the meaning of our life, our losses and sufferings and mistakes, and our relationships with each other. "Where are you?" afraid, alienated? Well, aren't we all. But the wise will answer, and will stand-together-above the anger and fear and pride and hurt, so that the world and the whole society of human beings may once more be made "good." Listen, we are only on the third page of a long, long book- our story and God's story- so there is still hope for us.

