

The Root

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
March 5, 2017

1st Sunday in Lent (Year A)

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7



He is named Adam, which derives from the Hebrew word for “earth,” “adama,” literally “earth creature,” a fitting name, since God is said to have formed him from the dust of the earth, breathing into him the *nephesh* – which in Hebrew can mean soul, spirit, wind – of life. Can you imagine, the writer asks us, that this lump of dirt was formed by God, carefully crafted by the Divine hand, and then inhabited by the Divine breath? Each time the Adam, the earth creature, drew a breath, he could feel a oneness with the One who made him, the One who had placed him in the garden.

The trainer for the exercise group I belong to is a Marine who served three tours of duty in Afghanistan. At the end of a grueling training session recently, as we were cooling down and stretching, he gave us a primer on breathing. “Imagine that your torso is a cup. When you breathe in, you breathe from the bottom of your stomach, and you fill the cup all the way to the top. When you breathe out, you pour the water all the way out, emptying the cup. Most people don’t pay attention to their breathing,” he said, “but athletes and people in combat have to pay attention to their breathing or else they will become frantic and lose the ability to think. Remain calm, and breathe, even while you are exerting yourself, and you will find a center.”

The *adama*, the earth creature, breathes in and knows himself to be created, knows himself deeply loved by the One who created him and gave him breath. There is no separation between them.

The name “Eve,” actually derives from the Latin name *Eva*, which in turn came from the Hebrew word “*Havah*,” which means “to breathe” and “*hayah*”, which meaning to “live” or “to give life.” This breathing, living one is made, says the writer, from the earth creature’s rib – flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone, he says – and breathes the self-same Divine air in her lungs.

And so the Earth Creature and the Breathing, Living One stand, side by side, naked, vulnerable, unafraid, with each breath they take reminded that they are one with

the One who made them and they are One with each other. This, the writer dares us to imagine, is what God intends. This is God's vision, God's dream.

But there is one in the Garden among God's creatures who does not share God's vision, whose dreams are not God's dreams. The serpent, says the writer, is the craftiest of all the creatures God made, manipulative and scheming. The serpent whispers a question based on a lie. "Did God say you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?"

The woman corrects the serpent's lie by saying that, no, they can eat from any tree in the garden, except this one, in the center. But she tells a lie as well – we shall not eat of it, nor shall we touch it. God did not say anything about touching it. But see what the serpent has done? He has introduced the topic of the conversation in a way that subtly changes the tone. The woman and the serpent, instead of speaking *with* God, are talking *about* God, and neither are speaking truthfully. The tiniest of gaps in the perfect relationship appears. It is all the serpent needs.

You know how it works. You are talking to a friend about a mutual friend. "Did he really say you were fat?"

"No, that's not what he said. He just said he almost didn't recognize me."

"Oh, well, but you know that *really* means..."

"Well, now that you mention it, he can sometimes be a jerk..."

Then the serpent moves in. "You will not die if you eat that fruit." The serpent accuses *God* of lying. Why? Because God is paranoid. "God knows that if you eat it, you will be like God..."

Now the small gap has widened. "The possibility of an alternative to God is introduced into the story."¹ This possibility proves captivating to the woman, and then to the man, and finally to us all.

The root of all temptation has always been this one thing: to turn our backs on the very breath that inhabits us, to believe we breathe on our own, that we are self-made, that we are not dependent creatures, that we can secure ourselves. In other words, to be like God.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), page 48.

God, the One who made them, the One who breathed into them the very breath of life, God's own life, comes walking through the garden and Adam and Eve hide. They are afraid of the One who made them.

They know they are naked, and they feel sudden shame. No longer is there an ease in their own skin, or an ease with one another. They are self-conscious. They cover themselves.

They are estranged from God. They are alienated from one another. The serpent had said they would not die, but now they know they already have in a way. They have died to innocence. They have died to the garden ease of relationship. They have died to themselves, to what they were created to be and do.

They have moved from unmasked vulnerability to covered shame. They have moved from unfettered walking with God to fearful cowering from God. They have moved from a fruitful oneness with creation, with one another, and with God to being strangers to themselves, to the world, to one another, and to God.²

Did God say you were God's baptized child? You do not belong to God. You belong to your race or your class or your nation, you belong to the bank or the government or your job.

Did God say God would never leave you or forsake you? God will not love you if you don't earn it. God will never forgive you for that horrible thing you did. You are too broken, too needy, too sinful for God's grace to cover you.

Did God say God cares for the world? Look around. Look at the refugees washing ashore. Look at all the disease, war, hunger. Look at the divisions that seem insolvable, threatening to undo us all. God walked out on this show a long time ago.

The voice is an ancient one, speaking with forked tongue, widening the gap between us and God, between each other, between what God desires for us and what we embrace. It tempts us all to abandon our trust in God, and makes ourselves into little gods.

² Inspiration for reflecting on the three outcomes of the garden disobedience – shame, fear, and estrangement – comes from Gene M. Tucker in *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year A* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), p. 148.

God's judgments on Adam and Eve are not really God's judgments, but only confirmation of the ways they have judged themselves. And yet, notice: they still breathe. They still live.

Yes, we know shame, we struggle with vulnerability, we cover ourselves in all kinds of ways, wear masks that hide who we really are, and yet we breathe, we live.

Yes, we know fear. We can live out of fear, cowering from God, from ourselves, from one another. And yet, we breathe, we live.

Yes, we know estrangement. We are quick to lash out. We turn away from our neighbors in need. There are wars and rumors of wars. And yet, we breathe, we live.

Adam and Eve, and all of us, do not live in the garden. But we do live. We are still the earth creatures, the breathing, living ones, God's creation. And God has not abandoned us. God pursues us, in Christ, with a love that expresses itself most completely on the cross, which invites us to dare to uncover ourselves, dare to set aside fear, dare to be reconciled.

Maybe my trainer is right. Whenever the echoes of Eden become too much for you, for us. Whenever we feel the creeping shame, the paralyzing fear, the violent estrangement, we can stop, fill the cup from the bottom of our stomach to the top, and know we are not our own, we are created, and loved. We will find our center.

This breathing is the task – and the great gift – of Lent. May it be so. Amen.