

Lent
Tempted

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

It is said that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, once played a practical joke on a dozen friends; all of them well-known public figures. He sent each of the men an anonymous telegram that simply said, "Flee at once. All is discovered." – It's reported that 24 hours later every one of them had left the country. We all live in fear of judgment, and fear of discovery.

In recent weeks the endless revelations of the Epstein Files - the lack of self-awareness, the stupendous belief that because of wealth or position in society or business or politics or the royal family, one would automatically be above and beyond the law has been numbing. There is nothing new in this - phone-hacking by some newspapers, the actions of some bankers in the world of finance, some politicians and their financial or immoral activities.

Those things are real, but I wonder do they distract from some of our actions? We may not have been 'found out,' but who amongst us, from time to time, has not wondered, 'There but for the grace of God go I'.

We are depressed by what we see in the news. We are depressed, sometimes, by what we see reflected back at us when we look in the mirror. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."ⁱ Disappointments, all of you.

In this season of Lent we are invited to engage with the vulnerability of what it means to be human. It also opens us up to consider the nature of God as our Redeemer, the One Who will not leave us broken on the far side of existence, but span the abyss by His searching love. This story in Genesis takes us back to basics. It tells the story of the incongruity of our intended life with God and the life that we have chosen.

When we hear the familiar story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we are tempted to think that the story is about sin, or original sin. Was it written, in the theological artistry of the Book of Genesis, to explain how, through temptation, humanity's 'Fall' from God's grace, and the introduction of death in the midst of life. Hearing the story at the beginning of Lent makes the connection even stronger in our minds.ⁱⁱ In reality the word, 'sin' never appears, nor does talk about 'punishment', or 'the fall' feature in God's Eden.

Humanity is situated in the Garden of Eden ('Eden' can mean 'delight', or 'luxury'). It is a place that is pleasant. This creative story tells us about how we are to think about the purpose of being human. It talks about tilling the land and keeping a garden - it is about care of the created world entrusted to us by God. Human purpose is the focus, and forms the background to this story of the Garden of Eden. The poet writer sees humanity being in relationship to the earth, which we are called to steward and maintain, and pass on; and in relation to God, the Creator. Humans were created for a purpose. We were not created for ourselves. We were created to 'till and keep the garden'. We were created to look after the Earth God has shaped. God has trusted us to do this. This is powerful poetry, and powerful purpose. When we look at how the earth has been treated by humanity since the dawn of time, how do we treat it? And because the Creation is more than simply plants and trees and ocean, but also all the creatures of earth, how do we treat them, and how do we treat our fellow humans? The Garden of Eden is an image of how the world should be as God intended: balanced, harmonious, caring, looked-after, respected. A place for everyone. In the poetry of Genesis - this is the purpose of God and the plan for humanity and the created order. This is our mission: to care and nurture. To be aware of the environment around us - the world of nature and the world of humanity.

How, then, did this purpose and plan go wrong? That is the next part of the story.

The accent of this story is on freedom. All the trees in Eden are available for ease, joy and well-being. "Freely eat", including from the tree of life. But there is another tree: the tree capable of death, the one offering knowledge of good and evil. This is a dangerous tree. It can disrupt the ordered way of the garden. Why is it there? Is it a test? Well, in a way. God wants a relationship with humanity that is mutual, and responsive. We get to choose. We are created in His image not to be robots, but to have choice. The Garden of Eden is about the implications and consequences of choice. Do we choose to do what God asks of us? Or do we choose to do our own thing, because we know better, and because nobody is going to tell us what to do?

God gives everything, including freewill, and guidelines and limits. We constantly rebel against the constraints. We turn the expansive freedom that is ours in Jesus into ideologies that keep self at the centre with predictable results. Like teenagers we push against the limits as a way of discovering our own identity, only to find we get lost in the crowd. In the name of 'free-market deregulation' politicians overturn limits intended to restrain inequity in the financial markets, leaving the markets in turmoil, and the powerless, poor. Untrammelled freedom where we do what we want and when we want sooner or later brings us to consequences we never intended.

The serpent, the snake in the Garden of Eden represents that whispering voice of self-centredness and our immense capacity to rationalise whatever we desire. God's restraints are pushed aside as if they do not greatly matter. The result is not human flourishing but the brokenness of life that we see all around us.

When wealth and privilege and power - whether with the greatest or the least - says 'me first', 'I can get whatever I want', 'I can do whatever I want', and to hell with the consequences if there are any, then to Hell we will go. Determined to be in control of what we think is good, we often find ourselves mastered by evil. We are humans, not created to be God. The immensity of taken on

responsibility for everything crushes us, and the subtle and crafty serpent of temptation laughs as we crumble and fail, and prove ourselves unfaithful to what God wanted for us, and from us. And down we go.

The story of Adam and Eve and their disobedience and their desire to do things their own way by their own choice is a parable for our world today. God wishes us to serve the purpose of good and be shepherds and stewards of the world shaped around us, not masters. We reject what we construe as servile and seek to do things our own way, because we think we know better than God. That pride before a fall is told in the story of Eden. Pride, and disobedience, and lack of comprehension, and falling, falling, falling. Away from light and kindness and plenty and sharing and fitting into a place that completes us and does not diminish us.

In the great things, but more often in the small things, that is too often the story of our lives. It is certainly the story of our world today when people choose what is wrong and hurtful in pursuit of pleasure and greed and self-importance and a belief that the moral and legal order do not apply to them. Beguiled by the voice of contemporary serpents, they reach out and snatch, and fall. And in their falling the harm caused to others is revealed. The breaking of rules and the disobedience and selfishness that accompanies never only affects the perpetrator.

This ancient Bible story invites us to reflect on what happens when God's good intentions and provisions are ignored and humanity is distorted. The big fails and the little breakages. When humanity is tempted to choose to listen to the voice of the serpent, breaking and the corrupting and the distancing gets a hold.

Is that it? Is it all over? Is there no way back?

Jesus comes, showing that the whispering voice of temptation can be withstood. In the wilderness, we see Jesus turn His face from temptation, and in compassion towards the broken world, offering a way out, and in time a way back to Eden, and blessing, and paradise.

This is why Jesus matters, and our relationship to Him matters. The season of Lent exposes the lies of a broken world, tempting us away, and back to listen to the single voice that speaks the lean truth of our future. Listen to Jesus, and follow Him.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Romans 3:23*

ⁱⁱ *Jon L Berquist, Feasting on the Word Year A, Vol 2, p27*