

“Adam & Eve: The Problem with Knowledge”
delivered Sunday, June 6, 2010
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Genesis 2:15-3:7, 22-24

While the American Space Program is winding down, I find myself being a bit nostalgic about it, since NASA’s exploration has paralleled my fifty-some years. Like many of you, I imagine, I can recall exactly where I was at key moments from Neil Armstrong’s first step on the moon to the Challenger’s explosion against that bright blue sky. But beyond my personal recollections, and with some understanding of the economic reasons for pulling back on the program now, I think the thing I will miss the most is the perspective the astronauts have given us of the earth: How after his historic first step, Neil Armstrong remembered that he couldn’t sleep, that in the confines of the lunar lander’s cabin, the Earth stared at him through the window like a big blue eyeball. How with a silver chalice and a vial of wine the size of a fingertip, Presbyterian astronaut Buzz Aldrin held silent communion on the moon. How Michael Collins orbited the moon while the others walked, and twenty years later, said: “I think the impressions I get are first of the Earth, that it is a small and fragile planet, and should be treated as such, a very delicate object. How James Irwin, a later moonwalker, had a profound religious experience, saying he felt, in a way, as Adam and Eve must have felt as they were standing on the earth and they realized they were not alone. (1)

It’s these snapshots of the earth from afar, that I will miss the most, because of the way they describe the whole creation – a thing of incredible and delicate beauty, created by God, and entrusted to our care. These more modern visual images poignantly describe what the writers of Genesis put into words long ago. Both - the astronauts and the Bible – picture for us a globe of goodness, fragile and precious, and they affirm that God and the creation are bound together in a distinctive and intricate way.

Today, were we to rise far above the earth and look at it from a distance, how we grieve what we would see in the Gulf of Mexico. All of us share a horrible anxiety over this dreadful oil spill. Show me one turtle or pelican gasping for air through the sludge and I am sick to my stomach; the enormity of this disaster is almost more than I can bear. Like all of you, I can barely get my head around the devastation to the ocean and its inhabitants, along the Gulf coast and its marshes, and the sheer despair among those whose livelihoods have been destroyed, people barely beyond the destruction of Katrina.

I have been reminded of what Thomas Freidman wrote two years ago about our stewardship of the earth, after a visit to Greenland to see its rapidly melting glacier: “Our kids are going to be so angry with us one day. We’ve charged their future on our Visa cards. We’ve added so many greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, for our generation’s growth, that our kids are likely going to spend a good part of their adulthood, maybe all of it, just dealing with the climate implications of our profligacy.” And then, in August 2008, he added what now feels like a dreadful and foreboding warning: “And now our leaders are telling us the way out is ‘offshore drilling’ for more climate-changing fossil fuels. Madness. Sheer madness.” (2)

As I have watched the madness of this disaster in the Gulf, I think the thing that has found me most frustrated is how our knowledge has come up short. I may be a little slow to grasp these things, but I keep wondering – if we have the know-how to make a well that sits on the ocean floor

five thousand feet below the surface – if we have that technology – then why can't we figure out how to fix it. Obviously, our knowledge is limited.

The story before us this morning, about the distinctive and delicate way we are bound to our Creator, hinges on the limits of human knowledge. According to the opening chapters of Genesis, after the creation was teeming with life and goodness, God made Man and Woman. The name Adam comes from the same Hebrew word as "The earth." It basically means "Earthling." Eve means simply, "Woman." God made Adam and Eve and gave them a place to live in a lovely garden. They have complete freedom with one exception. There is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, from which they are forbidden to take fruit.

In trying to probe the relevance of this ancient creation story for today's situation in the Gulf, I found it helpful to unpack the meaning of the name of this tree. "Good and evil" is an idiomatic expression that means more than the definitions of these individual words put together. When the phrase is used in other places it specifies "those who are too young to decide for themselves what serves their own best interests." (3) So this Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil stands not only in the middle of the garden, but also at the center of our creaturely nature. To eat of this tree means – we think we know what serves our best interests; we want to be autonomous and independent of God's will for our life. To eat of this tree denies that our knowledge about what is good for us is limited, and we need God to help determine our best interests. When Eve and Adam, eat the fruit of this tree, the first covenant between God and creation is broken; the first consequences of human freedom freely exercised are experienced; and human shame is felt for the first time.

From a biblical perspective, that is what I think we are called to feel in the wake of this Gulf disaster – shame, a conscious awareness of our guilt that we have fallen short of our responsibility to be faithful stewards of God's good creation. Our dependence on cheap oil, the inefficient cars we drive, every measure of our thoughtless waste drives us to shame, and a recognition that we ourselves, and not just BP, have broken covenant with God. I count myself among the guilty.

So... where is the good news in this ancient script being played out before the world today?

The Christian tradition has tended to tell the story of Adam and Eve with an emphasis upon prohibition and transgression, calling it by its familiar name, "The Fall." However there have always been counter traditions that see it primarily as a story of gift and blessing. As my friend and Old Testament professor Sib Towner used to say, "If there was a so-called Fall, then it was a fall upward – a fall into greater maturity with more responsibility. Likewise Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggemann has identified the three-fold gift: First, the gift of vocation. God gave the human creature a job to do, to till and keep the garden and to name the animals. Second, the gift of freedom. God says to them, "You may eat freely of every tree in the garden." Then thirdly, the gift of the law, "But there is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat for on the day you eat of it, you will die." The primary task of the human creature is to hold these gifts together in creative tension. (4) One's vocation matters for the good of the whole community. Human freedom has consequences and needs the law to provide some limits...so that all may genuinely be free. If we hold these gifts together – vocation, freedom, and law – then life itself is held together. If we don't, we fall short of who God has called us to be.

Then, here comes the little detail that turns out to be the good news. The text says that if Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden tree, they will die. They do eat, but what happens? Does God make them die... as promised? NO! God does let them suffer the consequences of their behavior, but not lethal consequences. God does not kill them; rather God makes clothes for them, mercifully

shielding them from their shame at being naked in one another's presence. In a word, God covers up our shame and then calls us to greater responsibility.

As Brian McLaren has written of Adam and Eve, "God pushes them out of the nest." This is God dealing with adolescent children. "It's the classic coming-of-age story, filled with ambivalence – a childhood lost, an adulthood gained." McLaren goes on to describe how leaving the Garden begins the human journey from the hunter/gatherer era – to nomadic herders - to agriculturalists – and on to city dwellers and empire builders – all steps toward increasing maturity. But the story also cautions... that each step of the socioeconomic and technological ascent makes possible new depths of moral evil and social injustice. (5)

You see, from the very beginning, God created a highly dynamic situation in which humans have a role to play in creation, and along with our freedom and limits, the future lies open to various possibilities. But the constant among all those possibilities for the future is the powerful presence of God, who continues to create in goodness, who desires abundant life for all, who wills life over death, and when we fall and fail – who covers our shame.

Given the incredible, environmental degradation of this good earth, the story of Adam and Eve calls us, as God called them, both to greater responsibility and to greater humility. We are contingent, dependent, never autonomous of the living God, and we have a job to do. So I suggest we not just watch the television coverage of the Gulf and grieve, but that we find ways – in our daily lives – to be more responsible stewards and more accountable to God. I've offered one source in your bulletin's worship notes that can help you find some ways. (6) But in the meantime, I urge you to remember Adam and Eve. They remind us in the living of these days, that because our knowledge is limited, we have a covenant with God, that is in our best interest to keep.

One more closing snapshot from outer space. Two years ago, looking down upon the earth from the International Space Station, Dan Tani said, "When I watch the Earth roll by, I realize I believe in optimism. I am an astronaut, and I cannot imagine doing what I'm doing, seeing what I'm seeing, and not being an optimist. ... We get to look back and see the Earth as a thing of stunning beauty. Of course, I know there are awful things going on down there, that people are in pain, wars are raging, poverty and hunger are taking far too many lives – but from here, I can only see the whole. I wish that everyone could see the world from my perspective; I believe more people would be optimistic about our future." (7)

You know, Adam and Eve help us see not only the whole like that, but also ourselves within it. Ourselves – with a role to play, with freedom and limits, and a future that is not in our hands alone, but is cradled in the goodness of a benevolent Creator. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Quotes collected years ago for a sermon I published in Journal for Preachers entitled, "Creator and Created."
- 2) Thomas Freidman, "Learning to Speak Climate," August 6, 2008.
- 3) Terence Fretheim, Genesis commentary in The New Interpreter's Bible, p. 349.
- 4) From Karen Sapio's fine paper for the Moveable Feast on Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-7, for First Sunday in Lent, 2008.
- 5) Brian McLaren, A New Kind of Christianity, p. 50.
- 6) www.worldwatch.org/resources/go_green_save_green
- 7) Dan Tani, "An Optimistic View of the World," This I Believe, npr.org, 2/7/08.