

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
MARCH 1, 2020
GENESIS 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7
“POLAR BEARS ARE LEFT-HANDED”

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

- FIVE PEOPLE, AN OLD MAN, A SCHOOL-AGE GIRL, A LAWYER, A DOCTOR, AND A SOCIAL WORKER, ARE ON A PLANE WITH ONLY FOUR PARACHUTES WHEN THE PILOT HAS A HEART ATTACK AND PASSES AWAY. AS THE PLANE BEGINS TO PLUMMET, THE FIVE PASSENGERS ARGUE OVER WHO DESERVES TO HAVE ONE OF THE FOUR PARACHUTES.
- THE SOCIAL WORKER SAYS, “I DESERVE TO LIVE BECAUSE I PROTECT VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND SUPPORT FAMILIES IN NEED.” SHE GRABS THE NEAREST PARACHUTE AND LEAPS OUT OF THE PLANE.

- THE LAWYER SAYS, "I DESERVE TO LIVE BECAUSE I ADVOCATE FOR MY CLIENTS WITH MY SHARP WIT AND MASSIVE KNOWLEDGE."
- THE DOCTOR GRABS THE THIRD PARACHUTE, "I DESERVE TO LIVE BECAUSE, WITH MY SPECIALIZED SKILLS, I SAVE PEOPLE BY DIAGNOSING ILLNESS."
- THIS LEAVES THE YOUNG SCHOOL-AGE GIRL AND THE OLD MAN.
- THE OLD MAN SAYS, "GO AHEAD, KID. TAKE THE LAST PARACHUTE. YOU HAVE DECADES AHEAD OF YOU WHILE I AM LOOKING AT THE END OF MY LIFE.
- SHE REPLIES, "THAT'S OKAY. WE CAN BOTH TAKE A PARACHUTE. THE LAWYER WITH THE MASSIVE KNOWLEDGE GRABBED MY BACKPACK...."
- AN EMPHASIS ON KNOWLEDGE DOESN'T ALWAYS GET US WHERE WE NEED TO GO.
- KNOWLEDGE IS KNOWING TOMATOES ARE A FRUIT. WISDOM IS KNOWING NOT TO PUT THEM IN A FRUIT SALAD.
- AND SOMETIMES WHAT IS CALLED *KNOWLEDGE* TURNS OUT TO BE MISGUIDED.
- FOR EXAMPLE, SOME SEE THE BIBLE AS A SCIENCE TEXTBOOK. MISTAKENLY SEEING THE BOOK OF GENESIS AS CONTAINING A SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION FOR THE CREATION OF THE EARTH OR A SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION OF THE ORIGIN OF MAN AND WOMAN.
- WHEREAS THE PEOPLE OF GOD WHO WROTE THESE SCRIPTURES WERE **NOT** TRYING TO EXPLAIN THE ORIGIN OF THE UNIVERSE.
- THAT IS THE ROLE OF SCIENCE. THE ROLE OF RELIGION IS TO HELP US UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF THE CREATION. THE MEANING OF BEING HUMAN. OUR PURPOSE FOR BEING ON THE CREATED EARTH. AND IN OUR TEXT THIS MORNING, WE DO NOT HAVE A STORY ABOUT ONE MAN AND ONE WOMAN IN A GARDEN. **THIS IS OUR STORY.** THE PEOPLE OF GOD WRESTLE WITH OUR EXPERIENCE OF ALIENATION. WHY DO WE EXPERIENCE OURSELVES AS ALIENATED FROM GOD? WHY DO WE

EXPERIENCE ALIENATION FROM ONE ANOTHER? AND WHY ARE WE DIVIDED WITHIN OURSELVES?

- NOW THIS APPROACH MAY SEEM STRANGE IF YOU HAVE BEEN CAPTURED BY THE LESS EXPANSIVE EVANGELICAL SLANT ON SCRIPTURE AND ITS INSISTENT ON THE LITERAL MEANING OF THE BIBLE. THAT MAY FEEL LIKE THE MOST VIRTUOUS FAITH POSSIBLE. BELIEVING IN WHAT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE. BELIEVING IN SOMETHING THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE WORLD.
- LUTHERANS WOULD NEVER BUILD A MUSEUM THAT PORTRAYS ADAM AND EVE WALKING ALONGSIDE DINOSAURS. THIS IS NOT FAITH. THIS IS A MISGUIDED ATTEMPT BY HUMANS TO KNOW WHAT IS NOT KNOWABLE.
- AND THE MISGUIDED APPROACH MAY SEEM VIRTUOUS UNTIL YOU LISTEN CLOSELY TO THE ACTUAL SCRIPTURE: "YOU MAY EAT INDEED OF ALL OF THE TREES IN THE GARDEN, BUT OF THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL YOU ARE NOT TO EAT."
- LENT IS THE SEASON WHERE WE CLOSELY EXAMINE OURSELVES TO SEE WHERE WE NEED TO BE TRANSFORMED. AND THE ANCIENT SCRIPTURES APPEAR TO CARRY GOD'S WARNING: "DON'T DO THIS. DON'T EAT OF THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL."
- WHY?
- GOD IS ATTEMPTING TO KEEP US FROM AN UNDUE YEARNING FOR CERTITUDE, AN UNDUE NEED FOR EXPLANATION, RESOLUTION, AND ANSWERS. FRANKLY, THE NEED FOR CERTAINTY LEADS US AWAY FROM BIBLICAL FAITH....
- A GUY DIED WHO WAS A BELIEVER IN A MULTITUDE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES. HE PROCEEDS THROUGH THE PEARLY GATES AND FACES GOD.
- GOD TELLS HIM, "WITH MY EVERLASTING KNOWLEDGE, YOU MAY ASK ME ANY QUESTION AND I WILL GIVE YOU THE TRUTH."
- THE CONSPIRACY THEORIST SAYS, "GOD, I REALLY NEED TO KNOW. WHO KILLED JFK?"

- GOD REPLIES, “WELL, THAT WAS LEE HARVEY OSWALD. HE WORKED ALONE AND ASSASSINATED JFK.”
- WITH A LOOK OF SHOCK ON HIS FACE, THE CONSPIRACY THEORIST SAYS, “WOW, THIS GOES EVEN HIGHER UP THAN I THOUGHT.”
- WHEN BIBLICAL FAITH GETS FRAMED WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF, THEN THE EGO GETS TO REMAIN IN THE DRIVER’S SEAT OF CERTITUDE: “I KNOW. I AM IN CONTROL.”
- FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE NEED FOR CERTITUDE ALWAYS RISES UP WHEN OUR WORLD IS UNDERGOING A MAJOR TRANSITION WHERE UNCERTAINTY AND COMPLEXITY REIGN SUPREME.
- AND, ECONOMICALLY, WE ARE IN TRANSITION. WE ARE IN TRANSITION IN TERMS OF GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION. NEW DISEASES LIKE THE CORONAVIRUS ARE THREATENING TO BECOME PANDEMICS. WE ARE STRUGGLING WITH THE FALLOUT FROM CLIMATE CHANGE. THE WAYS WE COMMUNICATE ARE CHANGING RAPIDLY. OUR POLITICAL SYSTEM IS IN FLUX. LONGSTANDING JOBS AND CAREERS DISAPPEAR AND NEW SKILLS ARE NEEDED TO SUCCEED. SCANDAL HAS RIPPED APART THE WORLD’S DOMINANT RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION. AND ON IT GOES.
- AND SO THE TEMPTATION TO INSIST, “I KNOW THE RIGHT WAY. I KNOW THE TRUTH.”
- THE MAJOR FALSEHOOD OF THE WESTERN WORLD CHURCHES IS THAT THEY HAVE LARGELY TURNED AROUND THE VERY MEANING OF FAITH—NOT KNOWING AND NOT NEEDING TO KNOW—INTO ITS VERY OPPOSITE—DEMANDING TO KNOW AND INSISTING THAT WE DO KNOW!
- THE ORIGINAL SIN—DESCRIBED BRILLIANTLY IN SCRIPTURE—WARNS US AGAINST THIS VERY TEMPTATION FROM THE VERY BEGINNING.
- LUTHER EXAMINES THIS STORY AND CONCLUDES THAT THE HUMAN CONDITION IS THAT WE DO NOT FEAR, LOVE, AND TRUST GOD AS WE OUGHT.

- HE RECONFIGURES FAITH, NOT AS BELIEF OR KNOWLEDGE, BUT AS TRUST.
- SO LET'S LOOK AT THE STORY AGAIN THROUGH THIS LENS OF TRUST.
- THIS IS THE STORY OF WHAT IS CALLED "THE FALL." IT IS SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS IN ALL MOMENTS AND IN ALL LIVES. AND WE DON'T HAVE TO VIEW IT THROUGH A NEGATIVE LENS. THE ENGLISH MYSTIC JULIAN OF NORWICH WROTE, 'FIRST THE FALL AND THEN THE RECOVERY FROM THE FALL AND BOTH ARE THE MERCY OF GOD.'
- IT IS IN THE FALLING DOWN THAT WE LEARN WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW SPIRITUALLY AND EXPERIENTIALITY. WE CAN TRUST WHAT WE MIGHT CALL THE "FALLING DOWN EXPERIENCES." THE BIBLE REVEALS THE PATTERNS THAT ARE ALWAYS TRUE.
- LISTEN TO THE SERPENT, WHICH IS THE VOICE OF DOUBT WITHIN EACH OF US, "DID GOD REALLY SAY NOT TO EAT OF **ANY** TREE IN THE GARDEN?"
- DO YOU SEE? ALREADY A MISTRUST OF THE VOICE OF THE DIVINE. WHAT DID GOD SAY? I CAN'T EAT FROM **ANY** TREE?
- AND THEN THE POUTING EXAGGERATION IN THE VOICE OF EVE, "WE CAN'T EVEN TOUCH THE TREE OR WE WILL DIE."
- DOUBT WILL ALWAYS FIND EVIDENCE FOR WHAT IT SUSPECTS. WE'RE ALL A LITTLE PARANOID. IT'S A FLEETING STATE OF MIND FOR THOSE OF US WHO ARE NOT CLINICALLY PARANOID. AND WHAT PARANOIA DOES IS ELIMINATE ALL EVIDENCE THAT DOES NOT SUPPORT OUR SUSPICION.
- PARANOIA EVENTUALLY LEADS US TO RESENTMENTS AND TO MISTRUSTING WHAT IS OUTSIDE OF OURSELVES.
- AND DOUBT AND A TINGE OF PARANOIA AND A WHOLE LOT OF MISTRUST LEADS TO WHAT? EATING OF THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL.
- AND WHAT HAPPENS? THE TEXT SAYS "THE EYES OF BOTH OF THEM WERE OPENED."

- IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, THIS BEGINS AROUND AGE SEVEN. THIS IS WHEN WE LEAVE THE GARDEN. UNTIL THEN, WE ARE IN THE WHOLISTIC AWARENESS WITHIN THE WORLD OF THE MOTHER. IT'S WHERE WE ALL BEGIN, WHEN, AS JOHN SAYS, "THE FATHER AND I ARE ONE" OR MY MOTHER AND I ARE ONE, AS WE ENJOY IN THE FIRST YEARS OF LIFE.
- BUT THE SPLIT HAPPENS. IT HAS TO HAPPEN. WE MUST EAT OF THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL AND SUFFER WE MIGHT CALL "THE WOUND OF KNOWLEDGE."
- WE WILL BECOME SUSPICIOUS AND MISTRUSTFUL BECAUSE OF WHAT WE KNOW: MISTRUSTFUL OF OUR PARENTS WHO, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE ARE IN OUR TEENS, ARE DUMB AS A BOX OF ROCKS. WE WILL BECOME SUSPICIOUS OF THE WORLD—OLD MRS. JONES, OUR MEAN FIRST GRADE TEACHER. THE CHURCH, WHERE WE HAVE TO BE QUIET AND SIT STILL. CRABBY MR. WILLIAMS WHO LIVES IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD. PARANOID ABOUT POLITICIANS AND POWER BROKERS AND FAKE NEWS AND THE DEEP STATE. WE WILL DOUBT AS YOU MAY EVEN BE DOUBTING WHAT I'M SAYING IN THIS SERMON.
- WE WILL BECOME ALIENATED FROM ONE ANOTHER, FROM THE WORLD, FROM GOD, AND FROM OURSELVES.
- AND ALIENATED PEOPLE WILL STOP TRUSTING THAT REALITY IS GOOD, THAT PEOPLE ARE GOOD, THAT GOD HAS OUR BEST INTERESTS AT HEART.
- THE PERFECT IMAGE FOR THIS SPLIT UNIVERSE OF GOOD AND EVIL—OF MISTRUST, DOUBT, SUSPICION, AND PARANOIA, THIS INTENSE AWARENESS OF BEING SEPARATE AND CUT OFF FROM LIFE IS THAT **"THEY REALIZED THAT THEY WERE NAKED."**
- IN PSYCHOLOGICAL LANGUAGE, WE WOULD CALL THIS ORIGINAL SHAME.
- WE ALL SUFFER FROM THIS SHAME: NOT WANTING TO BE SEEN BECAUSE, IF WE ARE EXPOSED, WE WILL BE REJECTED. IF YOU REALLY KNEW ME, YOU WOULDN'T LOVE ME.

- SHAME LEADS US TO WANT TO HIDE, TO COVER UP. BECAUSE BEING SEEN ONLY SHOWS THAT WE ARE INADEQUATE, INSECURE, AND THAT WE DON'T MEASURE UP.
- WE CLOTHE OURSELVES IN A THOUSAND WAYS IN ORDER NOT TO BE SEEN IN OUR FLAWED HUMANNESS.
- CAN YOU SEE HOW THIS READING OF SCRIPTURE IS SO MUCH MORE PROFOUND AND REVEALING THAN IF WE WERE TO DEBATE WHETHER ADAM AND EVE WERE LITERALLY THE FIRST MAN AND WOMAN OR WHETHER THE SERPENT IS REALLY THE DEVIL?
- AND IT GETS EVEN RICHER AS WE ARE THOUGHTFUL AND SOULFUL IN OUR APPROACH TO THIS STORY.
- THE ONLY ANTIDOTE TO SUSPICION, MISTRUST AND, ESPECIALLY, SHAME IS SOMEONE WHO KNOWS YOU IN YOUR SPIRITUAL, EMOTIONAL, RELATIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL NAKEDNESS AND LOVES YOU ANYWAY.
- THIS IS ONE UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IT MEANS THAT "GOD SAVES US."
- SCRIPTURE REVEALS THAT GOD KNOWS US BETTER THAN WE KNOW OURSELVES AND DOES NOT TURN AWAY FROM US IN JUDGMENT AND DISGUST, BUT TURNS TOWARDS US IN LOVE, FORGIVENESS, AND ACCEPTANCE.
- SALVATION IS ONLY SECONDARILY ABOUT WHERE WE END UP AT THE END OF OUR LIVES. SALVATION IS PRIMARILY ABOUT GIVING US A LIFE OF TRUST AND ACCEPTANCE NOW. AFFIRMING THAT "IF NOW, THEN LATER." IF GOD ACCEPTS US NOW IN OUR NAKED UNWORTHINESS, THEN WHY WOULD GOD CHANGE LATER? WE CAN NOW BEGIN TO REST, ENJOY, AND LOVE LIFE.
- LATER IN THE STORY, THIS TRUSTWORTHINESS IS CONVEYED THROUGH AN IMAGE OF GOD AS A DIVINE SEAMSTRESS.
- SCRIPTURE SAYS THAT "GOD SEWED TOGETHER CLOTHES FOR THEM OUT OF THE SKINS OF ANIMALS AND THEY PUT THEM ON."

- AGAIN, LUTHER IN A STUNNING INSIGHT PICKS UP THIS IMAGE AND CONCLUDES THAT WHEN GOD LOOKS AT US HE SEES US CLOTHED IN CHRIST.
- GOD TAKES AWAY OUR SHAME BY CLOTHING US IN CHRIST AND GIVING US BACK TO OURSELVES.
- LOOK AT US! WE ALL GOT THE BEST OUTFIT IN THE PLACE. CLOTHED IN CHRIST!
- OH, BY THE WAY. I TITLED THIS SERMON “POLAR BEARS ARE LEFT-HANDED.” AND A CROCODILE CANNOT STICK OUT ITS TONGUE. BUTTERFLIES TASTE WITH THEIR FEET. ELEPHANTS ARE THE ONLY ANIMALS THAT CANNOT JUMP. IT’S POSSIBLE TO LEAD A COW UPSTAIRS BUT NOT BACK DOWNSTAIRS.
- NOW WE ALL HAVE GREATER KNOWLEDGE, BUT WHAT’S THE POINT?
- BE WELL. TRUST IN THE GOD WHO PLACED YOU IN THE GARDEN OF THIS WORLD, CLOTHED YOU IN CHRIST, AND OFFERS YOU A LIFE WORTH LIVING.
- SERMON SONG: **SHADOW IN THE WAY** BY TIFT MERRITT