

“Hearing Footsteps”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Genesis 3:8-15; Mark 3:(20-30) 31-35

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Our Hebrew Scripture reading is a portion of what is known as the second Creation account in the book of Genesis. The first account revealed how Jewish writers envisioned God’s act of creation in seven days, with humanity being created on the sixth day, after which God rested. The second way Jewish writers told of God’s creation was as a planted and lush garden into which man, and then woman were placed.

We have come to know the man and woman as Adam and Eve, though Eve has not yet been named in the section of the story we are to hear, and in most translations, neither has the man, though the Hebrew word for man is “adam.”

The man had received the instructions to tend the garden, and the restriction against eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The penalty for eating the fruit is death. The man must have passed this warning along to the woman since she repeats it to the snake.

We pretty much know the story. The snake asks the woman about the restriction, then tells the woman they won’t die if they eat from the forbidden tree. Both the woman and the man eat the fruit, which is never referred to as an apple. Both the woman and the man know full well they should not have eaten it.

For our reading, printed in the bulletin, I will be the narrator. Bob will be God asking four questions of the man and woman, then imposing a sentence on the snake. I would ask the men to read the two responses marked “man,” and the women to read the one response marked “woman,” and as comfortable, the men can point a finger of blame at the women, and the women can point at the snake.

As our reading opens, God is taking an evening walk in the lush garden, but notices something is wrong. Let’s share our lesson in Genesis 3:8-15 (Common English Bible):

During that day’s cool evening breeze, they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden; and the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God in the middle of the garden’s trees. The Lord God called to the man and said to him,

[to the man] “Where are you?”

MAN: “I heard your sound in the garden; I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself.”

[to the man] “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree, which I commanded you not to eat?”

MAN (pointing at woman): “The woman you gave me, she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate.”

[to the woman] “What have you done?!”

WOMAN (pointing at snake): “The snake tricked me, and I ate.”

[to the snake] “Because you did this, you are the one cursed out of all the farm animals, out of all the wild animals. On your belly you will crawl, and dust you will eat every day of your life. I will put contempt between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers. They will strike your head, but you will strike at their heels.”

I am going to focus on this Genesis text this morning, but let us first turn our attention to Mark's Gospel. I am going to read only the final verses of the passage listed in the bulletin, so let me offer the context. During a flurry of teaching and healing in the first two and a half chapters of Mark's Gospel, we have read how Jesus and his disciples often tried to find a time and place for rest. It never seemed to work as the crowds always seem to find them. In this morning's lesson, Jesus returns home and we can surmise it is not just to enjoy his Mom's home cooked meal, but also to rest.

Again, a crowd has gathered, outside the front door of the house so they could not even eat. Jesus is out with the crowd, but the mood is different than it has been. Mark writes Jesus' family went out to restrain Jesus, because *people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind," and scribes came down from Jerusalem and said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."* One senses a fervency in Jesus' defense of himself. He counters the accusation with the question, *"How can Satan cast out Satan?"* He speaks of how the sin of blasphemy can be forgiven, with the exception of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which he believes has been committed by those accusing him of having *an unclean spirit.*" I find myself a bit exhausted after reading this passage.

Then things seem to calm a bit, as the lesson closes as it begins, with Jesus' family coming outside to call him inside. There is still a crowd around Jesus, but it seems the tension has eased. In Mark 3:31-35, let us hear Jesus' curious response when told his family is asking for him.

³¹*Then Jesus' mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.* ³²*A crowd was sitting around Jesus; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you."* ³³*And Jesus replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"* ³⁴*And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"* ³⁵*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."*

I don't know if we will do so, but our pattern would indicate we will buy a new car in the year 2022. I calculated that during our 36 years of marriage, we have owned thirteen cars, only two of which were purchased new, in 1982 and 2002. The first was a Ford van to accommodate our growing family, and on which there was not only a rebate, but the dealer sold us on a great interest rate of 13%! It was 1982, when some of you were earning 16% on your Certificates of Deposit. The second new car was a Chevrolet, purchased in 2002, for which we paid half the sticker price after combining a factory rebate with savings we had earned by using our General Motors credit card. So, 2022 would fit the pattern of a new purchase every twenty years.

When I make a major purchase, like a new automobile, I am one of those people who go out and look at it from time to time, do a walk-around, delighting in its newness, its shine, its new car smell. When I finish building a piece of furniture, or complete a project around the house, I do a similar walk-around, not out of pride or even admiration, but simply a sense of fulfillment and gratitude. Others may do the same with a renovation you have designed, a project at work you have completed, a thesis that is completed, or a garden you have planted, though garden walk-arounds usually occur several months after the seeds are sown. Artists who complete a painting, sculpture or piece of pottery may also take time to look at the piece, again not with pride and admiration, but a sense of fulfillment, gratitude, and even delight.

I am going to invite you to consider God doing such a walk-around in the garden in Eden, delighting in the beauty and that new creation smell. While God does not specifically say of the garden, "it was very good," as was declared each evening of the seven day creation story, I believe we can extend a similar delight by God about the garden in Eden.

In the first creation story, the Jewish writers envisioned a Creator God in the heavens putting everything on earth in its place in six days and resting on the seventh. In the second creation story, God walks on the earth. God's footsteps make a sound in the garden, and the intimate relationship between God and humanity takes shape.

The detail of the evening's cool breeze creates an image of God choosing that time of day to take a daily stroll in the garden, to do a walk-around of what has been planted, and check in on the man and woman created to tend the garden. Yet, on this evening's walk-around, it is as if the first scratch is noticed on the new car, or an angle in a project has shifted, or there is a small defect in a pottery piece, or something is eating the plants in the garden. Our first response is likely, "How did this happen?"

God's first response is, "Where are you?" It is God's first question to humanity. It appears to be an honest inquiry, not a rhetorical question. God does not seem to know exactly where the man and woman are hiding or what they had done. Something is missing. God notices the first scratch in a previously perfect garden – the new creation smell is gone.

The man's response to God's first question enables God to piece together what has gone wrong in the idyllic garden in Eden. *"I heard your sound in the garden; I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself."*

"I was afraid." God's footsteps in the garden did not create the fear; it is quite likely God had visited the garden on previous evening strolls. God realized the source of the man's fear was not even in his being found naked, for that was how he was created. The man's fear was in his knowing he was naked. *"Who told you that you were naked?"* God has put two and two together – the fruit of the tree of knowledge had been picked and eaten. The third question is rhetorical. God knew the answer before asking, *"Did you eat from the tree, which I commanded you not to eat?"*

The resulting confessions of the man and woman are all "me" centered, with fingers of blame being pointed. "Yes, I admit I ate the fruit, but..." It's as if they are singing the chorus to the old spiritual, "It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer;" then adding, "but it's not really my fault." Notice the man even has a little blame reserved for God as he speaks of "the woman you gave me." It is as if the man is saying, "God, it's your own fault! I mean if you hadn't given me the woman..."

Often the discussion of the story of the garden in Eden and Adam and Eve and the snake is about sin, temptation, and animosity, much of which is non-existent in the biblical account. We speak of what is traditionally called original sin and the fall from grace, though I think of the story as seeking to explain the origin of sin, a universal search by most faiths and civilizations. One could argue we have not only the origin of sin, but the origin of clothing, and we can only ponder what we might not be wearing this morning if the man and woman had not eaten of the fruit.

I think it would be good to set aside the misconceptions we bring to this creation story. First, there is often projected an animosity between man and woman that does not exist in the biblical text. Out of this can also emerge a theology that subordinated women, when we know the creation of the woman was an intentional act by God, she was created as a partner not a servant or slave, and if anything there is an idyllic equality of the creation of both the man and woman in the garden in Eden. We should also be clear the snake did not tempt the woman to eat the forbidden fruit, nor did the woman tempt the man. The snake simply told the woman they would not die if they ate it, as God had told the man they would. As it turns out, the snake was right, and that fact draws us to a relational distinction of the second creation story that is not as apparent in the first story.

The man's first response to God revealed his fear. We know fear is multi-sourced. There is fear of being harmed. There is the fear of the unknown, often linked to fear of being harmed. Then, there is the fear of being found out, which is why the man and woman are hiding. There are different dimensions to the fear of being caught, and this one is beyond that of having their hands in the cookie jar. This fear is rooted in their knowing they have broken a trust. God entrusted to them the garden, and trusted them to abide by the one restriction, one limit, one boundary: not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

For us, there is likely some paradox in what might seem to be a restriction on knowledge. As people bemoan a seeming lack of societal values, often it is voiced as, "These days, people just don't have any knowledge of what is good and what is evil, right or wrong." How interesting the sin of the man and woman was eating the forbidden fruit of the tree that gave them knowledge of good and evil. I'm not absolutely sure how we reconcile this, but let's take a look.

First of all, I am going to guess most of us believe knowledge and intelligence are good. We seek medical help and speak of progress and discovery in medical science as a gift of God. I don't believe God's prohibition of the garden was about humanity having knowledge. The concern was more what we today call ethics, those discussions that occur when one is able to create or do something, but a decision has to be made whether it is right to do. My mind often goes to the creation of the atomic bomb during World War II. Initiated out of fear Germany was close to having one, which turned out to be incorrect, this country continued its creation after Germany surrendered, even though some scientific voices urged stopping its development. Debate on this issue is usually about how the two atomic weapons we dropped on Japan seventy years ago brought the war to a quick end and saved American lives. What is rarely debated is that raised by this creation story, as to whether this discovery transgressed a boundary of knowledge set by God. It is the same debate we are called to have today about cloning life.

What is critical to understand is that in this second creation story, God is not advocating ignorance in place of knowledge, but trust in place of arrogance. There is an allure to knowledge which can draw us past boundaries God has wisely established for our own good. As Walter Brueggemann writes, it is easy to be seduced "... into believing there are securities apart from the reality of God." [Brueggemann, Walter, *Genesis, Interpretation Commentary*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, p. 54)] As we gain in knowledge, it can begin as seductive and then become addictive; and as with any addiction, we live with the false belief we can stop at any time.

Yet, in all of this, where is the good news? I would suggest if we linger in the sin, animosity and temptation themes of the second creation account, some of which are not even biblical, we will miss the gracious dimension of this story. We began with God's desire to walk beside and be in relation with the humans of the garden in Eden. Yes, they will leave the idyllic paradise, but we recall the promised punishment was not dismissal but death. As Walter Brueggemann writes, "The miracle [of God's judgment] is not that they are punished, but that they live." [*Ibid.*, p.49] "When the facts warranted death, God insisted on life for the creatures." [*Ibid.*, p. 50] Full life involves the challenge of trusting God for one's full security.

I see a security dimension in our Gospel reading as well. Jesus is dealing with accusations bordering on ridicule and blasphemy. His mother, brothers, and sisters were genuinely concerned for his well-being, and seem to want to provide him a shelter, a safe space in their home. Jesus rejects this offer of security, without rejecting them. His question, "*Who are my mother and my brothers?*" and his response could be heard as offensive by his caring family, but my view is he is rejecting trust in the offered security of family, not the family itself. He ends by saying those who do the will of God exhibit this trust, and are also his mother and brothers and sisters.

In our faith, we believe it is the Spirit of Christ who does walk-arounds of our lives, whose footsteps continue to remind us of the closeness of the divine presence. In a sense, our call to confession each Sunday is an invitation for Christ to take an evening stroll past our lives, and when found hiding, to have him ask us, "Where are you?" Our confession is the self-revelation of our fears and our sins of not trusting.

Then, in the assurance of forgiveness, we are given grace, new life and renewed courage to trust:

- To trust God knows more than us.
- To trust there are limits to what we need to know, particularly if long term harm may follow short term good.
- To trust God is still taking evening strolls in Creation, and,
- To trust God still delights in being in relationship with us.