Sermon for The Third Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, June 10, 2018

Text: Genesis: 3:8-15
Title: Getting out and going on

Growing up, my parish put on a children’s musical once a year. While these varied, they were always somehow related to a story from the Bible. There was one about Noah and the flood that required my brother, Geoff, to drag a giant piece of wood in front of the altar, and then rhythmically slam it with a hammer, keeping time for a solo that started, “Gonna put together me an ark.” Another year, it was Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, which we re-named “Josie and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” because my sister, Lauren, was the strongest singer and therefore cast as the lead. (To this day, I cannot get the pronouns right in any of the songs from this Broadway hit.)

And then there was the year we took on the garden. I can still sing the opening song from heart, a light and buoyant melody lifting these words:

Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden had nothing whatever to do.
He studied Latin while she took to napping
the pair of them sat in the shade of an old apple tree when there
suddenly came out of nowhere a serpent a sliding and slipping came he.
Rearing his ugly great head in a whisper he said,
“Listen, sister, I’ve something to say to you privately.
Just keep on sitting and take out your knitting and quietly listen to me.

The music then turns dark and sinister – which is to say, kind of jazzy - as the snake offers an alarmingly compelling case for eating the forbidden fruit.

Whenever I read today’s passage from Genesis, I hear this opening number. I can’t help it. It’s in me, and though I learned this song as a child I carry it with me still. I would guess, if you take a moment to think about it, that there may be some song or piece of art or passage of literature that pops into mind when you hear “Adam,” “Eve,” or “Eden.” Even if you didn’t have the benefit of growing up doing bad musicals in Church, this story is so foundational in Western culture as to be unavoidable. Maybe you’re reminded of a particularly beautiful service of Lessons and Carols, a la Kings College, where this passage is always the first reading, or you hear the lovely anthem, “Adam Lay-y Bounden,” as we will soon, which often accompanies it.
Or maybe it’s one of the countless medieval paintings or sculptures depicting the scene: our first ancestors, naked but for that ubiquitous fig leaf, standing under the yawning branches of a great tree, heavy with fruit, a snake curled around its trunk, Eve offering her beloved a crisp, sweet apple in her long, outstretched arm. Or maybe you recall poems and books that play on the theme: Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Hemingway’s *The Garden of Eden*. Or maybe - just a wild guess - this story immediately makes you think of the writings of Saint Augustine who first articulated the doctrine of original sin.

In so many ways this is all good, and a reminder of how the arts and culture all around us have been deeply shaped by the Christian tradition. The trouble is that these same evocative songs and images and stories can come to replace the original tale in our own imaginations. We might be so familiar with that catchy tune or that gorgeous piece of art or those compelling words that we forget – just plan forget – that the book of Genesis makes no mention of apples; that in the garden there is a tree of life and also a tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which our retellings often compress into one; that the Bible itself does not contain the phrase, “original sin,”; and that there is no evidence Adam studied Latin or Eve enjoyed knitting. (Shocker.) So the invitation before us today is to re-encounter this story as it is, to see it again for the first time, with genuine curiosity about what it is saying to us here and now.

It all starts with this delightful image of God stomping about in the garden, everything so new and fresh, the evening breeze coming up. Which says to us that this is an imaginative story, a rich tale: the setting a garden, the archetypal site of new beginnings, and God – God – appearing as a person with a body like ours. It’s such a refreshing opening, so hopeful, and God clearly assumes all is well. But something has already happened, something about which God is not yet aware. The man and the woman are nowhere to be seen, so God calls out, “Where are you?” Adam responds, explaining that they heard him and felt afraid, because they were naked, and so they hid.

I imagine that God is struggling to keep up. “Who told you that you were naked?” And then, perhaps there is a pause, as all the possible scenarios run through God’s head, until slowly, sorrowfully, God realizes what must be. “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” And then right here in Genesis we find the origins of an ancient human custom: passing the buck. “Don’t blame me,” Adam says. “The woman - *whom you gave to be with me, buddy* – she gave me the fruit.” This is all her fault, he all but pouts. So God turns to Eve,
bewildered, this new creation, this hopeful beginning slipping through those divine fingers like sand in an hourglass, and says, plaintively, “What is this that you have done?” And Eve, far from rising above Adam’s example, shrugs, saying “the serpent – whom you created, buddy ... well, she doesn’t say that part but she might as well have – that serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

It reminds me a bit of a parent who comes home early from a business trip, only to find that her sixteen-year-old twins are hosting the biggest party of the year in their home. It’s a real rager. The lights are bright. The music is blaring. As her Uber pulls up, she sees hundreds of kids through the windows, on the balcony, spilling onto the lawn, the ubiquitous red solo cups in their hands, all of them underage, all of them under the influence. And she charges in, horrified, betrayed, shocked, crying, “Adam! Eve! Where are you?” When she finds them they have no good excuse. “We don’t want to be goody two shoes anymore,” they say. Or maybe, “We aren’t who you think. We’re tired of all the pressure. We’re tired of feeling like we aren’t enough. We’re tired.” And a knot catches in her throat. “Who told you that you weren’t enough? That you weren’t good, just as you are? Who told you you needed to be perfect? That you couldn’t trust yourself? Your bodies? Your instincts? Who told you drinking and partying would help? Who told you that my rules were frustrating, not fun? Limiting, not life-giving? Who told you to be afraid of your feelings, or ashamed of who you are?” God is all questions in Genesis. God is just trying to keep up. And Adam points to Eve. And Eve points to Amy, the class bully who called her a brown-noser the day before. And they both point discreetly at their mother.

Now, keep in mind that the mother doesn’t want any of this to have happened. She is not happy with this reality. It is not what she had hoped for. But it demands a response. So she tells the kids that life is going to be a little harder from now on – extra chores, more errands, fewer hours on the iPad – until it is clear they have learned their lesson. There are expectations and there are consequences, and that is that.

Now, maybe this doesn’t sit any better than the original scene in the garden, but it points to what is really at stake here: this is, first and foremost, a story about what it is like when our relationship with God has been compromised. When trust has been broken. When we have used our freedom unwisely. When we have made choices that separate us from the fullness of God’s love. This is, actually, the definition of sin – that which separates us from our source and sustainer, and the felt sense of that agonizing separation, all in one. So when Augustine came along in the 4th century and started talking about “original sin,” he wasn’t saying that it was a
good idea. He wasn’t saying, “hey! Let’s all decide to be broken and prone to addiction and desperately lonely and often dishonest and filled with fear and shame and despair.” No. He was saying, instead, “Look: there is something inside us that has lost touch with God, and when we are stuck there we are no longer free: we will be filled with fear, we will be ashamed of who we are, and we will hide from God and those who love us most.” It’s all in Adam’s response to God: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” As though he needed to fear God. As though he should feel bad about his body. As though the appropriate response to God is to run and hide.

Augustine didn’t say this is a good thing. He simply said it is a real thing. An observable fact. A natural, unavoidable tendency in us. Think of it this way. I don’t always think it is a good idea that these awesome bodies in which we live and move and have our being are also so prone to disease and decline, but if I say, “these bodies are prone to disease and decline,” I’m not imposing that on anyone, and I’m not celebrating it, I’m just stating a fact. And – importantly – it is precisely from this tendency to fear, cower, and hide that Jesus frees us. When we talk about the miracle that was revealed in his life, death, and resurrection, we are talking about no longer being bound to these instincts, these nearly unconscious responses. We are saying that this is an important but of who we are but it is not all of who we are. We are talking about being freed from sin: restored to our original freedom; restored to our original blessing.

Many of you know that I spent most of last week back at Yale Divinity School, where I went to seminary. I loved my time at Yale. I loved worshipping with my classmates several times a day. I loved the challenge of my classes. I loved the earnest, heart-felt conversations and deep friendships I experienced. I loved learning. I loved growing. I loved feeling like God was close enough to touch. So it’s no surprise that, from time to time over the last four years since I left, I have missed that place and the people with which I shared that time. As I flew east last Sunday, though, I found myself profoundly aware of how much I had changed in those four years. I became a priest. I became a mom. I’ve made a home in two new parts of the Bay Area – Marin and Silicon Valley – and I’ve served and loved two parishes. I have experienced some crushing losses, and I have been, repeatedly, surprised by joy.

When I finally got to New Haven, though, do you know what I found? I found that Yale had changed in the last four years, too. Construction projects that had just started when I was there are now done. Two new residential colleges have opened. There’s a new Business School.
The locker room at YDS has been converted to meeting rooms. Whole blocks that were once so familiar are now strange to me. Which made me think that there is no such thing, not really, as going back, not even to the places where we grew up, or went to college, or started our professional lives. Not even to places we love. Not even to the garden. That this is not actually our great hope. Because things change. Places change. We change. And the funny thing was, being back there, noticing how I’ve changed, noticing how Yale had changed, I didn’t miss my seminary years quite so much. I felt grateful for who I had become and am continuing to become. I felt grateful for the part those seminary years played in making me who I am today. I felt grateful to see how a place that was dear to me was continuing to grow to meet the needs of other students. It was, actually, kind of wonderful.

The invitation in the story of the garden of Eden is not a return to paradise. This is, ultimately, not a story about going back, but of getting out and going on, and how very hard that is for us. Like the disappointed parent who loaded her kids up with trials and toils, God doesn’t drive Adam and Eve out of the garden because God wants to, or even simply to punish them. As every parent knows, holding those boundaries, imposing those limits, enforcing those consequences can be excruciating. We don’t do it because we are mad – after all, that passes, and it is so much punier than our love. We do it to help those who depend on us to learn and to grow, just like God knew that, in this unwanted, unwelcome reality, this sad turn of events, the best God could do was to help our first parents to learn, to grow, and to change as well.

In our parish school, Ventana, we talk a lot about having a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset, the difference being that with a growth mindset we see mistakes and failure as opportunities to do better, to learn, to practice. This doesn’t mean we like to make mistakes or fail, but it does acknowledge that this is simply a part of what it means to be human. The way I see it, God must have a growth mindset: always making the most out of our mistakes, finding infinitely creative ways to move us closer to fearlessness and freedom.

Our nostalgia for Eden is understandable, maybe even natural, but if we ever did manage to find our way back, I have a sneaking suspicion that there will be orange trees where we expect to find peaches; vines where the olive grove once stood; and flowers covering the once green fields. And it might be lovely. And we could start a new life there. But it will not be the same. There is no going back, but thanks be to God there is getting out, and there is going on. And maybe, just maybe, what we’ll find is a new place to call home, as fertile and fruitful as the
garden, as full of potential as Eden, and when we hear God crying, “Where are you?” we’ll stand firm and free, crying back, “Here I am. God, its good to see you.” Amen.