

“Out of Eden”

Rev. Dr. Robert M. Zanicky

July 30, 2017

First Presbyterian Church
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

“But for the mystery [of original sin], the most incomprehensible of all, we remain in comprehensible to ourselves” (Christian Philosopher, Blaise Pascal – 17th century)

Referencing Humankind, 18th century writer Alexander Pope proclaims:

“Created half to rise, and half to fall; Great Lord of all things, yet prey to all; sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled; the glory, jest, and riddle of the world!”

We do not say that God is the author of evil, and yet we can correctly say that human beings are born evil as a result of the bond of original sin with god alone as their creator. (St. Augustine, 5th Century, Primary Western Christian Theologian from antiquity – credited with developing the ideal belief of “original sin.”)

But, what about King David’s much earlier lament, over his great sin of murdering his lover’s husband? He laments in Ps 51 “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” Ouch!

OK – let’s go back to the beginning – Genesis – the first creating story found in Genesis 1, probably finding its final edition in the third and fourth centuries BCE, clarifies One God and all that exists in God’s creation is Good!

Then we move on the second creation story in Genesis 2 and following. This one is much older than Genesis 1. And this one includes Eden, special trees, and a Commandment (Rule/Limit).

These early chapters of Genesis reflect a people envisioning their past, their formation, their identity as a cohesive unit – community – tribe, clan, and nation. They were developing their etiologies – their originations. They were endeavoring to answer the “whys” of existence! No small task! (And, by the way – they’ve done a fabulous job!) Fascinating and wondrous too – that given the realities of life (as best we can ascertain) 3,000 years ago – life was not Edenic, but they looked deeper into themselves – finding a God – a good, ethical, singular Divinity – with intense interest in the humans!

Imagine the temerity of those espousing a Good creation – a Garden of Eden – all the food and water you desire – no mention of fear of neighboring hordes – just down the block – waiting to pounce and destroy. So they have that set – a Good, caring God – who creates good stuff. I’m thinking – as the ground dries up and cracks, the animals and plants succumb to the harsh environment, their pains increase as they age, their teeth blacken, they ache from morning to night, and ... (you get the picture). They breathe out prayers to this Good, Ethical God!

But, they could not, dare not stop there! After all – they were alive, and they lived among each other and around each other! All was not Eden!!! The Humans could not be given a “bye”! This was too

close to home - to the human heart! And what was to transpire in the Genesis account set the stage for realism – expectation – responsibility and redemption! But – it was harsh – needed – ownership to being human!

With human consciousness – choices would be made! Being created by a Good Ethical God – moral choices would enter the lexicon of what it means to be human. Appetites, desires, wishes were not the endgame of human existence – there is a higher plane!

So – the etiological narrative of the first man and woman. What better place to start? For from a man and a woman you get little men and women, and from there you get families, then clans, then tribes, then states, nations...(you know the story...). The focus here is the Moral/Ethical Choice! Underpinning all the philosophy, theology of the Judeo-Christian tradition – and each religion in its own right (Judaism and Christianity): Choices of – Good/Evil; Right/Wrong – envelope this interpretation of human existence – from its primitive, ancient beginnings to now – and as long as we humans walk “upright” on God’s green earth. (Did you get that – “upright”?!)

An ancient Greek etiology of beginnings has Zeus eternally punishing the Titan deity Prometheus – who created humanity; because Prometheus stole fire from Mt. Olympus, and gave it to humankind (to benefit them). And it was a disgusting eternal punishment!

Mesopotamian deities decided to drown all humanity because we were making too much noise for the petty gods to bear. (Yes, we have our flood story – but recall the “why” – Evil Choices – “Immoral choices”!)

Of choices, I love both creation stories in Genesis – each for their “goodness”, and ancient beauty. But the second story, which again is the earliest – and identified as I source, by scholars – has a familial warmth and ethical strength that resonates with me.

So begins the lesson: The Lord God makes “one” stipulation to man (and woman) “Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”!

“Right”! “Piece of Cake”! “Not to worry!”

Not quite!

Enter: The Serpent. (Fascinating! We humans are conflicted. Some bad/evil choices seem to derive from within ourselves, and some from without.) The serpent (which apparently had legs and could talk) sidles up to Eve, who is apparently very close to that forbidden tree. Temptation you know! The crafty serpent actually lies even to his question to Eve. Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?” He has drawn her in! She converses with the serpent. She clarifies, but adds her own narrative about not even touching the fruit.

Eve succumbs and takes a bite! She has been told she will know much more, being like God!

Notice that, Eve eats after conversation, dialogue, consideration, and then goes to Adam, gave him so “and he ate”. (Men are simple creatures!)

Ops – they are naked! They have been exposed! The Lord comes walking in the early evening when there is a delightful breeze (I love the imagery!). They hide – ashamed! They know – good & evil/good and bad choices, and they have chosen unwisely!

How human!

“Adam – you’ve eaten of the tree that I told you not to?” Classic male – “The woman gave it to me, she made me do it.”

God to Eve – “What’s your story?” Eve – “The serpent made me do it”!

Following the recriminations, God sets out the consequences.

The Serpent – loses his legs and must crawl and be stepped on. In the west (at least) the snake has more than not been a creature of derision and fear. Parenthetically: I had the honor of participating in the wedding of Michelle and Justin (who have attended our church). They were married in Justin’s home church in Old Forge. I was admiring the artwork and statues, when as I was standing in front of a beautiful statue of the Blessed Mary, I noticed that under her feet was a snake (reflecting the Genesis story).

Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden! No more ease – but hard work and labor. The man shall toil to eke out an existence from the ground (from which he was formed), and the woman will experience pangs of childbearing, etc....

An Angel with a flaming sword will stand guard to keep them out of Eden.

These early Hebrews, as they composed their cultural story, envisioned a plan, a purpose, and also knew much about the human heart! Individually and corporately it contains much horror, much to fear. The great 20th century writer G.K. Chesterton believed that “original sin” was the only Christian creed that could be proven to be true. (Think about it.)

In James Boyce’s new book, Born Bad: Original Sin and the Making of the Western World, he gives a “good” brief history of “original sin” in the West. He is fair, but leans more against than in favor. It’s that “original sin” thing – within him. But, this is a worthy read. He does not equivocate:

“The articulation of original sin and the making of the Western world were enmeshed. The doctrine, like the West itself, was a product of the tumultuous breakup of the Latin-speaking part of the Roman Empire. It under-pinned the distinctive religion formulated by the Catholic Church, as a Christian culture was built out of the imperial ruins. The creation story was the spiritual foundation on which the Western world was made, directing how people understood the divine, each other, the natural world and, about all, themselves.”

Of course, “Original Sin” has a history, a development – from misguided biology to flawed, and hurtfully ignorant theological declarations pertaining to sexuality, condemnation of infants damned due to the taint of “original sin”. Too many “moderns” have misinterpreted this “cautionary challenge” to humanity – as self and as corporate.

My concern is the lethargy and naiveté that progresses within our culture today, too often not even bringing to consideration the dangerous powers of human capacity to evil.

Of course the Christian faith leads to redemption! But as we fill our days – scripture, history, human experience, and a story of the Fall – need to guide us to withstand evil, to name it, and to unite against it as we all live East of Eden!

Amen.