

Original Sin

We Baptists have always stood for the freedom of the individual to read and interpret the Scriptures for themselves. Ideally, we hasten to add that this interpretive process should happen within the community of faith so that errors may be gently corrected by those with more experience and wisdom in such matters but in practice this safeguard has often been forgotten. Somewhere along the line, the heresy of literalism crept in. I heard a lot of that heresy over the years, particularly during the great inerrancy controversies that raged in the 70s and 80s. “Doubt even one word in this holy book and you destroy the message of the whole,” was the dire warning. It was and is pretty silly really. I knew from a very young age that there was a difference between facts that could be proven, that which required faith, and the kind of language that I learned to call metaphor. I mean, I found the image of myself as God’s little lamb to be comforting but I knew that being one of the sheep of God’s pasture meant something very different from growing white curly hair all over my body and eating grass. When I got a little older and some well-meaning saint would try to sell me on the literal-ness of Biblical truth, I would ask them about John 15:5, in which Jesus tells the disciples, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” And then I quickly learned that pointing out that particular Biblical truth got me branded as an “uppity brat” and earned me a scolding from my mom on the topic of back-talking my elders. Mama was proud of me for being smart – she just didn’t want me to be a smart-aleck. Sorry, mama.

In recent days, we have seen the relationship of factuality and truth take another twist. Our current national administration has a standard for truth which depends more on whether or not they like what is being said than any previous standard of proof. Provable or even proven facts with which they do not agree become “fake news.” Their own forays into provable or proven fiction become “alternate facts.” It looks like obstinate stupidity but it’s more likely to be a carefully crafted strategy of disinformation and obfuscation aimed at disheartening their opposition.

But as I mentioned before, there is a third option between hard fact and belief through faith. There is the metaphorical truth of literature and art, the kind of things that we learn from stories like the ones Rudyard Kipling told his young daughter who asked for them to always be told “just so.” For many wise, good, and spiritually perceptive people, Jewish, Christian, and “none of the above,” our Scripture passage this morning is profoundly true in the metaphorical sense regardless of its facticity. I want to talk for just a few minutes this morning about those truths and about how we can hear them in a new way through the metaphors constructed by other faithful people. There are still lessons to be learned from this old story about the original sins of humankind and, in our own faith, there is a special postscript about another meal.

So, let’s start with the story about the apple and the “core truths” about it. Sorry, couldn’t resist. And I’m not going to address today the whole business about whether it was an apple or a pomegranate or something else entirely. You may have noticed that Genesis simply says “the fruit of the tree,” so it’s really up to your imagination as to what kind of fruit it was. But what it certainly was was forbidden. In Genesis 2:16-17, God says to Adam, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

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The fruit makes another appearance in chapter three. In his treatment of the story, “The Diaries of Adam and Eve,” Mark Twain writes Adam recording, “She has taken up with a snake now. The other animals are glad, for she was always experimenting on them and bothering them; and I am glad, because the snake talks, and this enables me to get a rest.” Interestingly, the woman adds something to God’s warning to the man: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, *nor shall you touch it*, or you shall die.’” “Nor shall you touch it?” Where did that come from? Remember, as we hear the story initially, the woman hasn’t been created when God warns the man not to eat from that tree. Did God come around later and give the woman a further warning? Did Adam add to God’s words in giving his own warning to Eve to attempt to impress upon her the seriousness of the situation? Is this the first episode of mansplaining? Did Eve add this little detail as she responded to the serpent, to show that she knew something it did not? It seems to me that anyone who tells someone else that God said a thing, ordained a thing, or approves of a thing without absolute knowledge that God has indeed said, ordained or approved of that thing is treading some pretty thin ice. To represent oneself as knowing the mind of the Maker and to issue proclamations in the name of the Almighty is, in fact, to put oneself in the place of God.

Which makes it really interesting that the serpent then says to the woman, “You will not die.” Now the serpent has, by gainsaying the Creator, claimed equality of knowledge with God, if not outright claiming superiority over God. The serpent says, in effect, “God doesn’t know. I know,” or worse, “God is lying to you.” The crafty creature then offers the woman the opportunity to claim that same equality, if not superiority: “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” This is not a mistake or a quasi-innocent embellishment. This is a lie.

The woman either doesn’t know that she is being lied to or doesn’t care because the lie matches her desire. She eats the fruit and gets her husband to eat it as well. The opportunity to be like God is too powerful a temptation just as it still is. Deep down, we all desire to be like God, at least where our own lives are concerned. We want to be in charge. We want to be right and powerful and blameless. But we know we are not.

And that, my friends, is how death entered the world. Oh, not physical death, at least not immediately. But as soon as the man and the woman did the one thing that God had said not to do, they realized what they had done was wrong and they were ashamed. They saw their own nakedness and weakness and knew that they were not like God, could never be like God, and they were ashamed of themselves for being so eager to be more than they were that they had become less than they were. And in having disobeyed God and in feeling shame over having done so, they became aware of their separateness from God. And separateness from God, the Bible teaches us, is spiritual death. They were still walking around the Garden, healthy and beautiful, but inside them, something had died.

We didn’t read it but you know the rest of the story. In their sudden awareness of their own failing, the man and his wife attempt to hide themselves from God, much as a young child hides after breaking something he’s been told not to touch or a puppy retreats under the bed after messing the floor. The writer of this old story knows that it’s the automatic reaction of every

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young miscreant. It is, of course, never effective, especially with God. Our “Soup, Salad, and Soul” group read a few weeks ago about Jonah’s ill-conceived flight from God as well as the wisdom of the Psalmist who wrote, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” Nevertheless, once we become aware of our own fallibility and the idea that we depend completely on God for our very existence, we try to hide from God. We may move physically, trying to escape our reality and create another. Or we may hide from God in busy-ness, filling our days and nights with frantic activity so we don’t have to think about whom we are and how much we need God. We may try to avoid God by avoiding the places we encounter God, staying away from church or places that are quiet, putting away our Bibles, abandoning prayer. The frantic activity I mentioned before may be centered on one of God’s gifts to us, good food, our human sexuality, the love of another, taking what is beautiful and warping it in our attempt to find a hiding place.

But hiding is rarely effective even when it is ourselves we are hiding from. Sooner or later, we turn to scapegoating. “It was the partner you gave me, God. It was the snake you made. It’s your fault, really, God. If you didn’t want me to eat it, you shouldn’t have put it there and made it look so good.” We human beings are champions of scapegoating. “My brother Abel is the reason God doesn’t honor my gift – I’ll kill him. Our brother Joseph is the problem – let’s throw him in a pit. It is expedient for us that one man should die for the people rather than the whole nation perish.”

These are deep, deep truths, expressed through the metaphor of story. If only it weren’t this creaky old story, so misused and abused, so cliché. If only someone else could write a story with these themes. And, of course, they have, many times. I would suggest this morning two writers in particular who have told their own versions of these truths, writers with a certain cachet among millennials and other good folk who have become wary of “Bible stories.” As it happens, the two writers I have in mind were friends, both members of a group of writers that encouraged each other in the great English university city of Oxford in the years between the World Wars. The group, of which you may or may not have heard, was called “the Inklings.” The writers were Clive Staples Lewis, known to his friends as Jack, and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, called Ronald. Jack Lewis’ stories of temptation and fall are best known in his works for children, “The Chronicles of Narnia.” One may think first of the story of Edmund Pevensie in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. Tempted by the White Witch with Turkish Delight, a kind of candy for which the British are mad, to the wonder of the rest of the world, Edmund gives her power over his brother and sisters, only to realize what he has done to his great shame. There is also a similar story in The Magician’s Nephew, a prequel to the story of the wardrobe. In that book, young Digory Kirke and his friend Polly Plummer are accidentally present at the creation of a new world, Narnia. They have already encountered the evil queen, Jadis, from another world, Charn, and Jadis convinces Digory to help her steal a magic apple from a walled garden on Narnia. Jadis believes the apple will grant her immortality, which it does, but because she has come by it dishonestly it also brings her everlasting despair. Digory, who has been convinced to help when Jadis tells him the apple will cure his invalid mother, wants nothing for himself and so suffers no ill effects. But his mother is indeed cured.

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If you are looking for a more grown-up tale of being tempted by a potential good only to discover its negative consequences, I recommend Tolkien. Tolkien weaves this theme throughout his work, both his magnum opus, The Lord of the Rings, and its precursor, The Silmarillion. While Lewis gives us an apple, Tolkien is perhaps more thematically close to Genesis as his objects of desire are more likely to be jewels but the temptation they carry is to be like God. First, the Elf prince Fëanor comes to believe that the Silmarils, the jewels he has made which hold part of the light created by God, are as beautiful as God's light itself. His obsessive love for them causes him to turn against friends and family and many die tragically. Better known are the rings of power offered to elves, dwarves, and men by the evil Sauron. Although they allow the wearers great power, including that of rule over others, they also bind the wearer to Sauron through his own ring. It is this ultimately powerful ring that is at the center of The Lord of the Rings as desire for it warps and destroys even the most well-meaning people of Middle Earth who come in contact with it. All, of course, except for the humble hobbits, and even they are tempted before the last. To be like God, whether in creative power or in power over others, tempts even the most stalwart beings under the sun.

The truth contained in these stories, just as in the story of Adam and Eve, is not a factual truth. The fossil record is blank when it comes to hobbits and dwarves and elves and orcs. There is no planet which can be reached by way of a magical wardrobe. Snakes don't talk now and never have. Camels did not get their comeuppance from a djinn. But every one of us has at some point in our lives said to ourselves, "Oh, I don't need to follow that rule. That doesn't apply to me. That can't really be what God meant." Every one of us has seen a clear choice, at least once, between good and evil and not chosen good.

But oh my best beloved, there is good news. And it was delivered in a wild and wonderful metaphor by a wise man who understood better than anyone what it was to be tempted and yet not fall, who understood better than anyone how the men and women around him needed to be reminded of God's love for them all, who knew better than anyone the power of metaphor and faith and things that couldn't be proven. And so, instead of an apple, he offered wine. Along with the fruit, he gave them bread. And in that bread and in that wine he offered all humankind forgiveness and healing, ransomed us from the fall and made us truly the heirs to the Kingdom of God along with himself. Today, we will celebrate again with bread and grape and we will thank our Loving Creator once again for the second Adam, Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.