

Sermon 10/15/17
MUCC
Genesis 3:1-13

For many weeks now, we all have walked into the sacred texts found within the book of Genesis. As I have listened to Joy unpack these ancient and most holy stories, I have heard some recurring themes.

- I heard Joy say that these stories were influenced by the creation stories and myths of other peoples, cultures and religions.
- I have heard her say that these stories draw us closer across time and space in our desire to imagine where we came from and who we belong to.
- I heard her saying that the creation stories we have encountered are at their core, **stories about how to be most alive in this world.**
- I heard her say that that true aliveness comes from companionship and being in relationship and in community.

The creation stories we have encountered in the book of Genesis are stories that help us unpack how to be most alive, how to be most alive. The creation stories we have heard up until this point have spoken to that journey into aliveness, companionship, relationship and community. They have showed us that in fact, **life is good.**

These stories are not so much stories about God but stories about human beings and our relationship with God. Human beings and our relationship with God on a journey into aliveness. And today, in the story we just heard, we encounter a story that presents a bump in that road into aliveness. If you happened to be Jewish or Muslim, this story is in fact that, **a bump in the road on the journey to aliveness with God, with ourselves and each other.**

However, if you are Christian, today's reading presents more than 'a' bump in the road towards aliveness, it presents '**the**' bump in the road towards aliveness. For Christians, the story we encounter telling the tale of Adam and Eve, the serpent and the Tree of Knowledge represents the foundational text of how we have, over time, understood sin. In Christianity, this text represents what has been known as 'the Fall'. One story, yet across time, very different understandings of the significances of this story have emerged.

Before we dive into how other faith traditions have looked at this story, I just want to review again what is and what is not in this story. It is such an iconic story. Yet this story perhaps more so than any other story in the Bible, requires us to look very, very closely at what is actually there and not what has been layered onto the story through centuries of writings, art work, theological treaties and novels. There have been so many interpretations of this story that it is easy to lose our way amid the clutter of doctrine, speculation, theories, childhood education, and bad movies.

So let's review a few details of the story:

Sermon 10/15/17
MUCC
Genesis 3:1-13

- First a reminder that the word *sin* does not appear in this story and in fact does not appear in the Hebrew Bible until the Cain-Abel narrative, where it explicitly refers to the ultimate social crime, fratricide.
- One of the most common interpretations is to identify the serpent with the devil or Satan. Notice that our story does not so identify the serpent. Nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures is such an identification made. In fact the connection between Satan or the Devil and the serpent doesn't show up in the Bible at all until the Book of Revelations, written some 600 years after this story was most likely written down.
- Another misconception is that Eve tempts or seduces Adam. In reality she merely takes a piece of fruit—not an apple—and hands it to him; they both had been told not to eat of it, yet they both do.
- The part about nakedness is another of those verses that are overlaid with a history of interpretation that may cause us to lose the story. In that verse, Adam and Eve realize they are naked and make coverings for themselves. From the reference to nakedness, many have seen this verse depicting sexual awareness and somehow associate the "Fall" of humanity with human sexuality. But human sexuality is never seen as evil or sinful in the Hebrew Scriptures; in fact, it's often praised as part of God's good creation. Drawing the connection between this passage and human sexuality probably says more about the persons and cultures who draw those connections than it says about this passage itself. Within the text, nakedness does not equal sexuality.
- The Eden tale is frequently referred to as the "Fall" or "Fall of Man," although there is no fall in the narrative; that designation is a century's later Christian application of Plato.

Why be so cautious with this text? Because this text really **demand**s a fresh reading with clear eyes. The story itself has taken a back seat to the broader debates concerning the origin of sin in the world and the inability of human beings to do good. The story itself, with which we are so familiar, has lost its freshness and vitality. We have to listen anew to this story and we have to identify the understandings we may each have about this story that may not serve us in our unique journeys into aliveness. We have to listen anew.

Now this text is viewed as sacred scripture by Jews, Muslims and Christians. I want to look briefly at how all three faith traditions have looked at this story to see if we can identify the kernel of this story that may call us forward along that journey of aliveness with each other and with our God, to see if we can find what is especially relevant for us here today. To see if we can in fact listen anew to this ancient story.

In Judaism, as I shared before, this story is not '**the**' bump in the road on that journey, it is '**a**' bump in the road. That doesn't mean it isn't a foundational and critical story. This story has drawn the attention of Jewish scholars throughout the centuries. In modern Jewish thought

Sermon 10/15/17
MUCC
Genesis 3:1-13

though, this story did not lead to dogmatic importance, meaning dogma or doctrine did not arise from it. Again, critical story but not one that led to Dogma or doctrine. In fact, rabbinical tradition rejected the concept of original sin.

In Islam, which also holds this story as sacred text, it is taught that all humans are innocent at birth and they become sinful only when they consciously commit a sin. Islam teaches that Adam and Eve sinned, but then sought forgiveness and thus were forgiven by God. The Qur'an says that after Adam and Eve sinned, they asked for repentance and it was granted. Islam accepts the fact that Adam and Eve disobeyed God in paradise, but, like Judaism, denies the belief in original sin.

Within Christianity though, this story is 'the' bump in the road. It is known as 'The Fall' though as we just discussed, that term does not exist in the text itself. Traditional Christian understanding of this text flow from a man by the name of Augustine, who lives some thousand years after this story was written down and hundreds of years after the death of Christ. Augustine was the Bishop of Hippo, in what is now Algeria, and lived in the early fifth century. He was one of the greatest theologians in history and his ideas still influence Christian thought today. Although Augustine didn't invent the doctrine of original sin, his ideas about it continue to dominate Western Church teaching.

Augustine wrote that the entire human race participates in Adam's sin, which is passed on generation to generation through the act of sexual intercourse. Because of the inherited corruption of Adam's sin, human free will is damaged, making God's special, intervening grace absolutely necessary for salvation. Augustine believed that original sin is a condition we have, not something that people do. He believed that something in human nature is and always will be contrary to God. He believed that the whole human race was damaged for all time. And he looked to this text, this story of Adam and Eve, as his source document to come up with his thinking about original sin.

Most traditional interpretations of this text flow out of Augustine's understandings and writings. His writings would deeply inform the thinking of the Protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin in the sixteenth century and flowed right into mainline Protestant churches across Europe and the New World.

There are many, many Christian practices that flowed out of Augustine's understanding of this text. Because of Augustine's writings, for example, for centuries, Christians believed that unbaptized infants go to hell as a consequence of original sin and thus could not be buried on hallowed or Church grounds. This doctrine to this day carries incredibly strong weight in the Roman Catholic Church, continuing to drive core teachings on issues such as the use of birth control. To this day, many Christians believe that original sin explains why there is so much

Sermon 10/15/17
MUCC
Genesis 3:1-13

wrong in the world created by a perfect God, and why people need to have their souls saved by God.

Why does background context matter so much for this particular story? Because as Christians, we have an incredibly strong and pervasive understanding of sin that flows from Augustine's reading of this story. 1500 years after Augustine wrote of original sin, it still impacts how we read this story. It still impacts how we search for meaning in this story. To engage in the this story and find that kernel that calls us forward on the journey to aliveness with ourselves, each other and our God, we have to confront and stand with our history of this story and not ignore the ways Christianity has been understood it through the centuries.

As Christians, we have to decide what about our historical understanding of this story serves us moving forward and what it is time to leave behind. Speaking personally, I have come to a place where I have consciously set aside the traditional Christian teaching of original sin. When I do this, I turn to this text with new eyes. I read and encounter an ancient story of life and loss and struggle to draw near to God. I do encounter truth in this story but for me that truth is not that humanity is fundamentally bad.

When I look at this story anew, I see a story that speaks to a universal understanding we have as humans **that we are not yet what God has dreamed us to be**. My guess is that this story speaks to the realization (both ancient and today right now) that **our societies, our systems, are not what our God has dreamed us to be**. My guess is that this story speaks to us all of the painful acknowledgement that **God's yes to us is too often responded to with our no**.

I can look to my own life and my own choices and know that, as unflattering as it is to acknowledge, I am not yet what God dreams me to be. I both ignore that call into yes and I turn away from that call into yes. As a member of society and systems, I can see where as a people, we say no to God's yes, creating or holding up systems of oppression, dominance, injustice and violence. Systems where exclusivity exists and differences are feared. Systems where mutuality is not valued and domination systems reign, sexism, racism and classism. Systems that support oppression which results in individual despair and lack of fullness in life.

We are not yet what God dreams us to be, I think we all achingly know that. We feel that in our hearts. We live that in our actions. The world is not as good as we want it to be, we are not as good as we want to be. My guess is that this ancient story of Adam and Eve speaks to this understanding of how we are **not yet** what God dreams for each of us, **not yet** what God dreams of for all of creation.

And what does God dream us to be? One of my favorite theologians is a woman by the name of Elizabeth Johnson and she would characterize this dream of God for us and for all of creation as

Sermon 10/15/17
MUCC
Genesis 3:1-13

“flourishing of all beings in their uniqueness.” Fully and radically alive. Alive in the way Joy talked to us about in those first stories of creation. God created and **it was good**. God’s dream is what we have heard since we started encountering these ancient stories in Genesis, **aliveness to ourselves, each other and to our God. Radical, bone-shaking, amazing aliveness.**

I reject the doctrine of original sin that says that we are fundamentally in our nature destined to sin, that we are at our nature ‘bad’ or ‘flawed’. Our God is so much bigger than that, so much bigger than that. Our God has dreams for each of us, for all of us. **Our God creates and it is good**. God calls us good and beloved before anything else. Sin is not at the heart of our nature; blessing is. And that didn’t stop being true because Adam and Eve ate fruit in the Garden. In fact, it never stopped being true. It’s critical that we remember this. God calls us good and beloved before we are anything else. We are steadfastly held in relationship with God. We accompany God on that journey into aliveness, into God’s very dream for us and for all of creation.

At its core, I believe that this is a story of God **who is for us**. This isn’t a story of separation and loss, of fall. I believe it is a story of invitation and participation. That means consciously rejecting understandings of original sin. It means encountering this text anew. It means trusting in a God who we journey with and for and to. It means believing that we are good and we are called into something radically new, radically alive and powerfully beautiful.

Our God creates and it is **good**. Our God creates and it is **good**.

Amen