

Life beyond the garden

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 7, 2015

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. *Genesis 3:8*

The story of Adam and Eve is about disobedience toward God. While the creation stories are mythological and metaphorical in origin, they convey an important and relevant truth about human nature, free will and our obedience to God. The figures of Adam and Eve represent the origins of our humanity. When they are beguiled by the serpent and partake of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge they are assured that they will not die. When they assert their independence from God they are held accountable for their actions and lose their innocence as they try to hide from God.

What we have in common with the story of Adam and Eve is that we all begin life in a state of innocence. We are all born into our own personal spiritual Garden of Eden. We lose our innocence when we first learn the difference between right and wrong and willfully chose to do what we know is wrong. When that happens, we step out of our spiritual Garden of Eden, never to return.

From the beginning, it has been our responsibility to be good stewards of what has been entrusted to us in God's creation. There will always be those who either don't care or refuse to believe in climate change. When we exploit the gifts of creation, we dishonor God for what has been given us. It is basic common sense to have an awareness and concern for those who come after us. All of us bear responsibility for being good stewards in caring for God's creation.

Despite of what we read and hear of all the violence and suffering and the on-going threats of terrorism, I am of the conviction that God's world is essentially good. I believe that the power of good is far greater than the power of evil. God has given us the gift of free will and we bear the responsibility to understand the difference between right and wrong. When we abuse the privilege of free will and choose to do what we know is wrong, we become victims of our own oppression. Sin drives a wedge into our relationships with God and each other. Try as we might, we can't shift the blame and guilt on anyone else.

The church's mission is to proclaim deliverance from the burden of our guilt. The first time we were aware that we did something wrong we may have been caught and punished. If no one ever knew about it and we got away with it, the guilt weighed upon our conscience. Guilt is a peculiar emotion. About ten percent of it can be instructive and motivating while the rest of it is destructive. Guilt can move us to assume responsibility for our actions despite the temptation to shift the blame on others. If you have ever been used as a scapegoat for those who are at fault, you know how easily blame can be shifted away. The more we encounter highly critical people who constantly put people down the more it is apparent that they really don't like themselves. Contrary to what you may have known or heard, the church is not in the business of inducing guilt. The mission of the church is to heal us of the oppression of self-imposed guilt.

In our gospel narrative today, when Jesus heals those with emotional and mental ailments, the Scribes accuse him of being an agent of the demonic forces of Satan. In fact, it is the demonic behavior of the Scribes that causes confusion by making good to appear as evil. Jesus teaches that a house divided against itself cannot stand because evil cannot combat evil. Only the power of love can do that. Those who distort the difference between right and wrong become victims of their own oppression. It is understandable to wonder if God allows evil in the world. Rather than grasping at abstract and erroneous answers, it is better to put our energy into facing the fact of evil head on. We must stand against injustice by boldly renouncing all that is oppressive and demeaning. We must name the sins for what they are so that by God's grace they can be redeemed. We must never give in to the power of evil nor believe that it can ever overtake us. Life beyond the innocence of our Garden of Eden existence is about accepting responsibility for our actions and the trouble we bring on ourselves.

It is said that creative people are rarely neat and tidy. Albert Einstein's office was messy with calculations on a blackboard, books and publications stuffed on the shelves and papers strewn all over his desk. This was the workplace of a genius who helped usher in the atomic age with its potential for creative good as well as destructive evil. We don't think of Einstein as a

religious man, but he once wrote that Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind. It was his observation that, Scientists were rated as heretics by the church, but were truly religious because of their faith in the orderliness of the universe.

It is a mistake to think that science and religion are mutually exclusive or that scientists have to be skeptics or atheists. Science relies upon hard facts discovered and tested while religion seeks answers to life's universal questions. When it comes to discovering God's active presence in the world, the world is our laboratory. As a student, I questioned why I was required to take science courses. In retrospect, I am glad that I had to study biology and chemistry because it brought me closer to an awareness of the ongoing operation of God's universe. New scientific discoveries reveal God working in the world through the wonders of the natural order. I have my own theory that the process of evolution will cause humanity to evolve into a higher being than we are today. Our survival depends upon an innate trust in each other that enables us to settle our differences with resorting to violence.

We tend to blame God for what we don't understand and what we think is unfair. The reality is that we can't expect life to be fair nor can we expect to be spared from suffering. It is all part of the natural order of the universe. We take a great step in maturity when we learn to accept responsibility for our actions and live with what is beyond our control. With all our scientific advances, there is still great mystery in the world. What we can't comprehend, we offer up to God