

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7 “What Went Wrong?” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/1/26

My daughter Mikayla and I were visiting over the phone about the trilogy she is watching for the first time, The Lord of the Rings, by J.R.R. Tolkien. It is reaching a whole new generation which proves that truly great literature has no time stamp. We were comparing it to the Harry Potter series, which I reminded Mikayla was partially inspired by Tolkien. Tolkien’s creation of a vast world of mysterious creatures and an ultimate battle between good and bad was, in turn, inspired by the book of Genesis. In the first several chapters of Genesis, we discover an attempt to explain how and why we got to where we are today. This is one of those stories taught to children at a young age. It is also heavily misunderstood by children of all ages. In Sunday School, 5-year-old Tommy was especially interested in how Eve was created by God taking a rib from the original human’s body. Then, the teacher explained, we had the first husband and wife. Considering the age of the kids, the teacher chose not to disclose this was only a myth as males and females have equal number of ribs. As Tommy rode home from church, he began to complain that he didn’t feel well. His mom asked what was wrong. Rubbing the side of his body, Tommy said, “I have a pain in my side. I think I’m going to have a wife.”

For a significant part of my life, I had little time for the story of Adam and Eve. It seemed to me that the story was always misused to make a point, whether it was the weakness of women, the priority of men, or humanity’s right to be top dog in creation. I was a child of the 70’s when the cover of LIFE magazine featured an image of two women standing side-by-side. On the right was a classically painted image of a tall naked woman standing head-and-shoulders above a modern woman, who is fully dressed. The figure on the right is clearly the biblical figure of Eve, covered only by a strategically-placed fig leaf and holding an apple. The modern feminist beside her holds a sign that says, “Eve Was Framed.” Eve was framed. Several years ago, I reread the creation stories and discovered I rather enjoyed them. This is an origin story for all of humanity, a narrative backdrop against which we can understand human nature as a whole. If you think about it, most superheroes have an origin story that tells who

they are, what they do, and includes some sort of early trauma. In the Black Panther series, T'Challa's mom dies in childbirth, and his father is later murdered. In the Batman series, Bruce Wayne witnesses his parents' murder. Superman is sent away from his home planet just before it explodes. God knows how important it is for us to understand who we are and why we are here, so we are given a wonderful story, told by a master storyteller, filled with truth far more powerful than facts.

The story of the Garden of Edem prompts us to ask what went wrong, and in order to understand that, we must imagine the garden itself. It was a world of graciousness and freedom, a garden filled with a bounty of good things, like my Mom's garden always was towards the end of summer. It was filled with flowing rivers, plants, animals and a loving Creator. In this Garden, God gave the humans good work to do. Our New Revised Standard Version says humans are to "till" the garden. Yet, as First Testament scholar John Holbert notes, this word "till" comes out of the older King James Version when nearly everybody in 17th century England was the son or daughter of the plow. It is a mistranslation of the original Hebrew word which meant "to serve". Likewise, in chapter 1, when God instructs the humans "to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the animals," this too has been misunderstood. The Hebrew word used for "dominion" means more of a partnership rather than a hierarchy. In essence, humanity was created to be "partners" with the Garden, not to plow it up as its master or hold some sort of rule over it. God is the Ruler of Creation, not us. Once we get clear that we are the garden's servants, then we have the possibility of fulfilling the demand of the next verb, "to protect" or "to guard." We, as servants of the soil, must relate ourselves to that soil in such a way as to protect it. The garden depends on us as much as we depend on the garden. Rev. Steve Kindle, one of our good church friends who served a three-month interim during my last sabbatical, wrote a book about 10 years ago in which he dedicated to this congregation. It included an insightful focus on our responsibility as care-takers or stewards of creation. He wrote that our world is marked by dwindling resources and a fierce competition over the spoils of creation. We will continue to have a worsening

environmental crisis until we reject the philosophy that we are the creator and nature only exists to serve our ends. Therefore, the need to understand the meaning of the Genesis story has never been more important than in our day and time.

Possibly God knew this would be our temptation all along, to become equal with God, because within the Garden a forbidden tree is placed, the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. God says, “You may freely eat of every tree in 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.” Just imagine you are a guest in someone’s home and they tell you, “Help yourself to any food in the house, feel free to root through the cupboards, the pantry, the refrigerator. “Mi casa es tu casa,” except for one thing – there is a pink Tupperware container on the second shelf of the fridge, behind the mayo – Don’t even think of eating what is in there. If you eat it, you will die.” Don’t you think at some point you might ask a few questions – “What’s in the pink Tupperware container? Why keep something so dangerous in the fridge?” Our protagonist Adam showed an amazing lack of curiosity if you ask me. He asked no questions and no explanation is given as to avoiding the tree. But the prohibition was clear – this was God’s world and God set the rules. The sneakiest of all the wild animals, the serpent strolls in, because at this point, the serpent still walks upright. He tells Adam and Eve that if they eat the fruit, they “will be like God” which is what most folks want, right? Why do you think the 1985 song by Tears for Fears, “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” was so popular? It spoke to an undeniable human desire. The serpent takes a clear prohibition and turns it into an “option.” What was once a given in the Garden, God’s goodness, turns into naivete. He makes the Loving Creator look like an excessive rule maker to be circumvented. If you eat the fruit, the serpent encourages, you will be independent, able to make your own decisions about what to eat and what to believe, you will have your own personal power and control.

So the woman and the man eat the fruit... and only after both eat, does anything change (in case you think someone can blame just the woman). Did they become like God? Only in their awareness that they were naked, and this frightened them. Enter

the presence of fear and with that, all forms of death follow. In the moment they decided there was something better than trusting and enjoying the goodness of God, and reached for knowledge and power over the mysteries that were only known by God, death ensued. It was just one of many more moments of death to come – soon there would be the death of easy childbirth, the death of relaxing, toil-free labor, the death of accountability. When God calls out to them, realizing they are now in hiding, Adam is ready with his excuse, “She made me do it,” and likewise Eve says, “The serpent made me do it.” God doesn’t abandon them but helps them to make clothes out of fig leaves. In campfire circles where the story first originated before the age of penmanship, this would have invoked a great deal of laughter. Ancient Hebrews knew all too well what fig leaves felt like; we might equate it to number 2 grade sandpaper. So they would have laughed, “They sewed what together? I bet those loincloths scratched to no end!” In the end, this is a coming-of-age, timeless story as true as true can be from God’s perspective, where harmony, joy and intimacy are replaced with fear, blame and anxiety. Relationships are ruptured between each other and God. This is the result whenever we try to be like God. We are simply not cut out for the job, we are so easily distracted, but that doesn’t seem to stop us from auditioning for the part.

Thankfully, there are still moments of life and love intermixed with death that can only come from God. In the Lord of the Rings, Frodo Baggins is on an epic quest only he can fulfill: to destroy the ring of power that corrupts all who touch it by throwing it into the fires of Mordor. When it becomes clear that his journey is endangering his friends, he tries to do things by himself which only wreaks more havoc and chaos, until he is tracked down by his dearest friend and caretaker, Samwise Gangee. Frodo waves him off shouting, “I’m going to Mordor alone, Sam!” To which Sam yells back, “Of course you are! And I’m coming with you!” What was once seen as a solitary journey, becomes a tale of friendship that eases the hardship and heals the brokenness that arises from arrogance and trying to be something we are not. God made us to serve and protect the great garden, but over and over, we end up

scratching ourselves in our fig leaf aprons wandering what went wrong? Is it any wonder that we need a Lenten journey, to focus our distracted minds on who is our Creator and why we are here? Let us continue as companions and friends to search for God's leading.