

## **In God We Trust**

**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7**

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, UCC, Camden; March 1, 2020*

As we enter the season of Lent, we are invited to grapple with the existential questions of who we are, how we consciously or unconsciously approach our life, our own limitations and potential, our fears and projections, and in whom we place our trust.<sup>1</sup> Our text speak to these questions in compelling ways. Let me begin with some comments about the excerpt from the story in the Garden of Eden Jonathan read for us. [Please note that we will look at this story in greater detail also in relation to creation care/climate change with the help of Rabbi Lily Solochek during our next Lenten Series session on Thursday!] In a way, the story names our gradual human journey of growing into consciousness from the perspective of people from potentially as long ago as 600-800 BCE! It is amazing how much of that still rings true today!

Chapter 2:15-17 sets the stage by both naming how God provides for the needs of humans and cautions Adam [and Eve] not to eat from the tree of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. There is plenty else to eat. If they eat from this tree, they will supposedly die. Next up (3:1-7) is the familiar sequence of the serpent's cunning argument to Eve that eating from that tree will not mean death but greater seeing (root meaning of knowledge) so they can "be like God." The logic of the story falters when Eve supposedly thinks that eating from the tree is a "good" idea before she has even eaten from the fruit that would allow her to distinguish good and evil. Never mind that conundrum. Also, never mind that the story has been used to justify the oppression of women as the weak source of all troubles. Remember that Adam has been right by her side. He passively eats the fruit as though he has paid no attention to the conversation!

It is striking that as soon as their eyes are opened, they suddenly become self-conscious of being naked and vulnerable and immediately try to cover themselves. They suddenly have a heightened sense of being separate from each other and the source of their being. What was not an issue before, has become an issue. God eventually knows something is up because they

---

<sup>1</sup> We gradually journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem where he will be rejected and killed for his radical message of God's immense love and breadth of inclusion.

will also hide themselves from God later in the story. As the story unfolds, we move away from a sense of blessed shared belonging and ease to blame, shame, disruption and inequality.

To my mind, the point of the story is not primarily about disobedience and who is to blame for human struggles. Knowing “good” and “evil” has meaning as we distinguish between what is life-giving and what makes life cease for the wrong reasons. Whether it is opposing oppression and exploitation or how we care for creation, we are asked to discern how we respond to challenges. But the underlying deeper challenge lies beyond “knowledge” in the conventional sense as though we could solve all our issues through thinking. God has a way of seeing far more radical than that – this also came up in our Eckhart retreat yesterday. God has an integrative way of seeing beyond right and wrong, life and death, etc. In God all things and beings find their unified center though we are all unique expressions of God’s creativity and radiance. Everything potentially shines with the glory of God whether we perceive it or not. Everything is held by God’s love. When we don’t come from a place of trust and love, we lose our connection with this greater integration.

How we approach death is one such example. Contrary to what the Garden of Eden story may evoke, I doubt that our mortality is a punishment wielded by a distant God. Nowhere in the story does it say that Adam and Eve were immortal to start with. We are consciousness come alive, as someone put it. With the new consciousness of mortality came fear, the need to self-preserve, a sense of alienation, shame, blame and the need to have power over others to secure our fragile sense of self. Life and death are quickly only seen as binary, either-or, poles of opposite value. Adam and Eve are not yet equipped to integrate both although the journey of living and dying and rising and living and dying again and again actually expresses the natural flow of all of creation.

It seems that millennia later, our own consciousness is still struggling to connect with a more trusting, holistic and integrative view of what it means to be human, intricately woven into the vast and complex web and patterns of life. As all things have their origin in God, all things are

interrelated, all things belong to God in life and in death. Our very mortality has the potential and power to heighten our appreciation and gratitude for the preciousness of all that is precisely in its fragility and beauty. How we see what is truly real has direct consequences for how we treat each other and the rest of creation and, ultimately, how we treat God. [We are exploring all this in our Lenten Series on creation care and climate change. Come and join in!]

The story about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is in some ways a pointed counter-story to Adam and Eve in the Garden. Jesus has just been baptized and received the assurance that he is God's beloved child. He then consciously chooses to go into the desert to fast. This is not the lush garden of Eden with an abundance of food. The desert is an arid place. As the Christ who models a pattern for our living, he exposes himself to the human yearning for security. Jesus' fasting evokes the invitation to empty himself of all external and conditional sources of identity and security (remember Eckhart)— i.e. our accomplishment, status, gender, race, intelligence, financial portfolio, etc. Jesus anchors himself in his original and unshakable identity as the beloved, an identity that is also ours whether we believe it or not.

The 'devil' (*Diabolo* – throwing something in our path to trip us up; *Satan*=accuser) intentionally waits until Jesus is famished to go after him. Notice how each temptation is conditional, starting with an "if." This does not posit a loving and trusting relationship with God. The devil raises doubts, conditions, entices the need to have proof of God's providence, protection and offers the temptation to secure power outside of God. The first challenge is: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread (Mt 4:3)." Rather than trust God's providence, Jesus is tempted to secure his survival by his own power. [This also mirrors the struggle of the Israelites wandering in the desert after escaping slavery in Egypt.] Jesus responds with quoting the Hebrew Scriptures: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." [This is not an adequate answer to starving children in our world but a profound spiritual response to a spiritual and existential question about trust.] Jesus holds fast.

The second challenge touches on the need for assurance that we will be safe from harm. This time the devil makes use of that word of God Jesus cherishes. Standing on the pinnacle of the Temple, where people of the time located the presence of God, the devil quotes from Psalm 91, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written: 'God will command the angels concerning you. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus comes right back with more scripture that reminds us to hold on to our trust in God no matter what the circumstances.

Finally, the devil goes after our need for power and control and the compromises we are willing to make to secure them. Jesus is taken to a high mountain which is usually a place of divine revelation (see Mark's sermon from two weeks ago). With a view of all the kingdoms, the devil says to him: "All these I will give to you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus replies without hesitation: "Away with you Satan [=accuser]! For it is written, 'Worship your God and serve only the Holy One.'" Jesus refuses to seek power that is separate from the source of his own being, sensing that he would only be co-opted for the wrong purposes. The monarchs, dictators and power brokers of the world may desire such false allegiances but not Jesus. As he vulnerably holds on to the source at his own center, the devil disappears and the angels do minister to Jesus. The key has been to not break the bond of trust. Jesus as the Christ has come to model this path of trust in God's love in the midst of vulnerability and the courage of not-knowing, not figuring it all out only intellectually. In Lent we remember that he even trusted this love enough to risk his own death. From this connected place, he connected with the suffering of everyone and everything else in creation.

I would like to close with a true story about a young boy who lived from such a place of interconnectedness and compassion. His little sister had been sick from birth and was not responding to treatment. She desperately needed an extensive blood transfusion but also had an extremely rare blood type shared with her brother. When all attempts to find another donor had failed, the parents and doctors asked him if he would be willing to give blood for his sister.

He was given time to think about it. After a while, he asked: “Will it really make my sister feel better?” When he was reassured that it would help her get a lot better, he agreed.

The siblings were in the same room hooked to transfusion equipment. He could observe the blood flowing from his veins and how his sister was receiving his blood. When the procedure was almost complete, the boy wanted to speak with the doctor and asked: “Will it take long? Will it take long for me to die?” He had thought all along that giving his blood to her would end his life. Where had he found the courage and freedom to “empty” himself enough that love could flood his whole being? What allowed him to embrace the not-knowing of what lay ahead beyond the life he knew? How had he grown so radiant, compassionate and connected at a young age to let love drive his way of seeing as God sees? We should not expect or demand this of our children but I sense in his courage the kind of connectedness and consciousness that Jesus modeled for all of us. May we not be afraid to die each day to what gets in the way of the flow of love and trust that angels of all kinds will minister to us. Amidst such trust our lives are made new each day. Thanks be to God.