

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“The People’s Choice: Is the story of Adam and Eve relevant to us?”
Genesis 1: 26-27; 2: 4-7, 18-22; 3: 2-21; 4: 12, 25
8th Sunday After Pentecost
July 23, 2017

We continue the People’s Choice summer worship series based on topics which you in the congregation have suggested to the preachers. The question for today is this: Is the story of Adam and Eve relevant for us today?

Seeking an answer to the question, we turn, as you would expect, to the opening chapters of the Old Testament book of Genesis.

In Genesis, we find two distinct creation stories preserved in the library that we call the Bible. (1)

The creation story told in Genesis 1 is the latter of the two, likely having been written after the Babylonia Exile, around 550 B.C.E. In this story, God is a poet-creator.

God has been creating the cosmos for five days. On the sixth day, God sets about creating land animals, and in verse 26, we read,

Then God said, “Let us make humankind (*ADAM*) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind (*ADAM*) in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

The word *adam* is not a proper name, but rather a generic name for the whole human species. When used in the way that it is utilized in Genesis 1, *adam* is collective, plural, in number. Both male and female are implicitly present in this collective word *adam*. (2)

This is interesting, isn’t it? It is particularly interesting—startling even—and perhaps particularly relevant in our own day when increasingly we are viewing gender identity as being situated on a more fluid continuum rather than solidly binary. This is not the focus of my sermon, but it is certainly something to think about.

What is also interesting to note is that in the ancient world, it was rulers, kings, emperors, and pharaohs who were held to be in the image of God. So what Genesis is saying when it makes the affirmation that humankind is created in the image of God is that we are all royalty in God’s eyes. (3) God and the Bible are not simply interested in the lives of the rich and the powerful. God and the Bible are interested in everybody (4)...everybody, which means you and me. And I suppose this is a hint toward the ultimate conclusion that I will reach at the end of this sermon that indeed the stories of Adam and Eve are relevant to you and me today.

In Genesis 2, we move to the second story, likely written 500 or so years earlier. Here God is not a poet-creator so much as God is a hands-on artisan, a potter perhaps – molding and shaping the creation.

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man[there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

All is well in the Garden of Eden, but then, as the story goes, the intelligent and crafty serpent appears on the scene. The serpent offers the forbidden fruit. The woman eats it. She gives it to the man. He eats it. And before you can say, “Paradise Lost,” the Garden of Eden is in their rearview mirror.

But the story does not end. It continues.

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.” Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.

We’re not even a paragraph into the life of the first family and already we have the first dysfunctional family. We have the unimaginable pain of the death of a child at the hand of his own brother. Cain kills Abel. He is forced into exile, as his parents had been before him, albeit with a protective mark placed upon him by God that will prevent others from harming him.

But the story does not end. It continues.

Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.”

Last Sunday, Mary Margaret Porter shared in her sermon that reading Bruce Feiler’s book *Walking the Bible* contributed to her decision to go to seminary.

As coincidence would have it—or providence, as we Calvinists like to say—Bruce Feiler makes another appearance in today’s sermon. (Bruce Feiler is Jewish, so he probably would get a kick out of knowing that he has been quoted by Presbyterian preachers two Sundays in a row.)

Indeed, today’s People’s Choice topic came from someone who had heard Bruce being interviewed about his recently published book entitled *The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us*, was intrigued, and suggested that this would be a great subject for the People’s Choice series.

I will make a couple of observations before moving into the story of Adam and Eve and its relevance for us today.

The first is that there are so many rich themes in their story—a veritable tree of knowledge studded with tasty theological fruit—that a preacher could probably preach a whole summer series on these stories from Genesis 1-4 by plucking off these various themes one by one. However, I am devoting only one Sunday to their story, and thus I have had to make some choices regarding which themes to address. I imagine that you will leave worship with more questions than answers! That’s a good thing, or at least I think so, because it will send you back to Genesis to read these significant chapters for yourself.

The second observation...or a confession, I suppose...is that preaching on Adam and Eve has proved more daunting than I expected. In crafting the sermon, I have tried to put myself in the place of you who are sitting in the pews. (This is a discipline which I follow every week when I write a sermon...and you make it easy for me to picture you sitting in your pew because so many of you sit in the same place EVERY SUNDAY!) In writing this particular sermon, I have realized that each of you is likely in a different place. Some of you are married and glad to be married. Some of you are unmarried and glad to be. Some of you are married and wish that you weren't. Some of you aren't married and wish that you were. You may be lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and straight, and this will likely color how you read the story and hear the sermon. This is challenging for a preacher, especially for a preacher who believes with all her heart that the gospel is all about freeing us to be the people God created us to be and not judging and shaming us. So I ask that if you hear a judging or shaming word in this sermon, that you will trust that it is unintentional on my part, that I still have a lot to learn, and that you won't hesitate to share what you are feeling with me so that I can grow and learn.

And I also want you to know that for me, what has been eye-opening about the process of writing the sermon is that I have come to realize more deeply than I have ever realized before is that while the story of Adam and Eve does offer a word about marriage, above all, the story of Adam and Eve is a metaphor for all human relationships, how we relate as human beings who are a part of God's great, big, diverse human family.

It has been a revelation to me to realize that while I have preached a number of sermons on Genesis 1 and a few sermons on Genesis 2, I have sorely neglected the story of what happens to Adam and Eve after they leave the garden. However, I have come to the conclusion (at least for the purposes of these summer worship series) that the story of what happens after Adam and Eve leave the garden is most relevant for our lives today.

The story of what happens after the departure from the garden is relevant because we all live in the reality that is life beyond Eden.

Adam and Eve still matter because they capture what remains essential about being alive, whether one lived in 1000 BCE or lives in 2017: we have a deep need for being connected with fellow human beings. And our biggest threat to being the whole people God created us to be is feeling left out, isolated, fearful, alone. And God clearly desires for us to find refuge in one another, even though forces all around us conspire to drive us apart. (5)

The forces that would seek to drive us apart emanate from the reality that life is hard. Yes, life is hard.

Bruce Feiler writes, "this subtle give and take in the twilight of Adam and Eve's life feels stunningly modern. In one of their final appearances on the biblical stage, Adam and Eve are portrayed as a couple who have endured repeated blows of hardship...they know the gloom of banishment; [they have experienced the death of a child and thus they know] the isolation of loss; they know the despair of a long, challenged life." (6)

This is the truth that is life.

But a further truth that is embedded in the story is that in the midst of hardship, God is their keeper and God is still our keeper.

The final thing God does before banishing Adam and Eve from the garden ranks as one of the most touching of divine acts in all of Scripture, I believe. In a clear indication that God does not intend to abandon them, God fashions "garments of skins" for Adam and Eve and clothes them. God sends them into the world with a divine blessing to "be fruitful and multiply." (7)

And after Cain kills Abel and is sent into exile, he, like his parents, goes with God's blessing. God gives Cain a mark that will prevent others from harming him. Cain may not have borne the role of being his brother's keeper, but it is clear that God is Cain's...and by extension, all humanity's...keeper. (8)

How is the story of Adam and Eve relevant to us today? By reminding us that no matter how much of a mess we may make of life, God doesn't give up on us, but keeps on blessing us. (9)

And the blessing which God gives us is embodied in relationship and love and grace and, ultimately, the courage to rebuild life in the face of loss and pain.

In the musical *Hamilton*, Alexander Hamilton and his wife Eliza are estranged after his affair. As tragically ironic as it may seem, the one thing that is strong enough to bring the two of them back together is the death of their 19-year-old son Philip.

"There are moments that the words don't reach," Eliza's sister sings of the grief that mother and father share. "There is suffering too terrible to name."

And yet Alexander and Eliza-bitter, broken, unspeaking-try to do the unimaginable: They take long walks. They move uptown. They go to church. They pray. And finally, in shared silence and shared sorrow, Eliza takes Alexander's hand. There is forgiveness, and they begin to rewrite their story as connected human beings in the huge narrative that is life. (10)

As I read the story of Adam and Eve, the most powerful aspect of the story and its relevance for us today, is how as a gift of God's grace Adam and Eve continually return to one another. They start life united, then Eve separates and goes off to eat the forbidden fruit. She could have remained apart from her fellow human being Adam at that point, but instead, she returns to him. Adam could have chosen to cut himself off from her, but he joins her in eating the fruit. They could have separated after leaving Eden, but they don't. They remain together. They could have split after losing their son. Instead, they reunite and have another child. (11) And as the storyteller unspools the continuing saga, it is from this son Seth that God's creation of future generations is made possible.

I love the way that Antoine de Saint-Exupery puts it, "Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction." (12)

And, this, I believe, is how the story of Adam and Eve is still relevant to us today.

1. W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 14.
2. *Ibid.*, 25.
3. Bruce Feiler, *The First Love Story: Adam, Eve,, and Us* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 254.
4. *Ibid.*, 33.
5. *Ibid.*, 12-13.
6. *Ibid.*, 213.
7. *Ibid.*, 187.
8. *Ibid.*, 195.
9. *Ibid.*, 235.
10. *Ibid.*, 204.
11. *Ibid.*, 256.
12. *Ibid.*, 204.