

The Serpent in the Garden

By
The Reverend Rebecca Kirkpatrick
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

August 25, 2024

Genesis 3:1-21

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. ⁸They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at 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.

⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

¹¹He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹²The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

¹⁴The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. ¹⁵I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”

¹⁶To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

¹⁷And to the man he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

²⁰The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

²¹And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

When I was in Preschool, my mother volunteered as a docent at the Pittsburgh Zoo. In particular, she worked in what was then called the “children’s zoo,” which meant that once a week, she would schlep me with her to the zoo while she tended to the smaller and tamer animals—possums, rabbits, porcupines, and hedgehogs—cleaning their cages and feeding them. Her work also included taking these smaller and tamer animals out of the zoo to local elementary schools to lead classroom presentations. I joined her for all of those trips as well, as she would load caged porcupines and possums in and out of the back of our Chevy station wagon.

But there was one additional exotic animal that went on those school trips with us - a boa constrictor.

Boa constrictors didn’t live in the children’s zoo but in the reptile house. So, as we packed up the animals for each presentation, we would also walk together up a little zoo path to the back entrance of the reptile house to pick up a snake.

You may or may not be aware that the easiest way to transport a snake of that size is via a knotted pillowcase. I don’t remember exactly how it played out each time, but it went something like, “One boa constrictor, please,” and then she would be handed a pillowcase filled with a snake.

That snake needed to ride in a more secure location in the car than next to a porcupine in the trunk, so the boa rode in my lap in the backseat.

There are some days when I ask my mother, who while a wonderful and remarkable human being bears little resemblance to a snake charmer if she thought it was at all odd or even risky to entrust me at four years old with the snake or maybe even to entrust the snake with me. Nope, she always replies. It wasn’t a big deal at all.

I can still remember the weight of it and watching it inside that thin piece of cotton squirming around on my lap. It was actually pretty cool, and I always felt very proud of myself once we were inside the classroom and these older children shrieked at the sight of the snake when my mother pulled it out of its case. It didn’t frighten me at all.

We were just a snake and a little girl - two of God's good and beloved creatures.

Or at least that's what I thought until I started attending Sunday School, and found out that the snake was the most notorious of all the animals in all of scripture and that my ancestor Eve didn't fare much better.

Any of you who have ever visited me in my office here at the church might have spied the bumper sticker on my bulletin board that I have kept since a college internship at the National Organization for Women. It boldly declares, "Eve Was Framed." I am delighted as we come to the penultimate sermon in this series on the animals of the Bible, to declare that this cursed snake has been slandered as well over centuries of interpretation. So let's spend a little time together redeeming both the snake's reputation as well as Eve's and to try to find something meaningful and hopeful in this complicated story that could actually be the subject of a lifetime of sermons.

Old Testament Scholar Lynn Japinga sums up the history of this story and the interpretations that have come from it this way -

"Eve is portrayed as a flawed, stupid woman easily tricked by the serpent, as a seductive, conniving woman who tricked her innocent husband, and as an intelligent woman in search of wisdom. The story of Eve and this snake is simple enough to be told in a children's picture Bible but complicated enough to mystify commentators and theologians."¹

Much of what Christians have understood about this snake and this story has come from two of the earliest Christian theologians—first the Apostle Paul and then St. Augustine who lived in the late 4th and early 5th centuries.

We have a taste of how Paul and his negative understanding of Eve influenced interpretations of Genesis # from the first letter to Timothy, likely written by a Pauline devotee. The book of Timothy is what we call a pastoral epistle or letter, not because the writer is reaching out as Timothy's pastor, but rather that he was teaching Timothy how to BE a pastor. That meant, in addition to many other really

¹ Lynn Japinga, From Widows to Warriors: Women's Stories from the Old Testament.

lovely things it includes about leading a church, it also includes instructions about limiting the role of women in the church's leadership, justified only by Eve's fateful decision to listen to that pesky snake and her subsequent corruption of her husband. If a woman can, in one act, shift the entire fabric of the created universe, just imagine the damage she could do in a single sermon or bible study.

Paul also heavily drew upon this story from Genesis, not just in the ways that he prohibited women's leadership in the church but also to explain why there even is sin in the world in the first place and how the greatness of our sin makes even greater the salvation given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul declares that just as sin and thereby death came into the world through one man, Adam and his disobedience, so it is the obedience of another Man - Jesus Christ that we have all been made righteous.

It is in the writings of Paul that we encounter the first hints of what would be developed by Augustine in the centuries after as a theology of Original Sin.

In her book, *Adam and Eve and the Serpent*, historian and theologian Elaine Pagels points out that while Augustine builds on the theology of Paul and Paul's interpretation of Genesis, in some of the earliest Christian thinking, there was a significant emphasis not on the sinfulness of human beings but on the goodness and freedom of people as God's creatures. We can see in the arc of Augustine's own writing this fateful shift towards original sin. A shift that coincidentally coincides with the generation of Christians who moved from being marginal and oppressed to being the official religion of the Roman Empire. Pagels writes,

“Augustine transformed much of the teaching of orthodox Christianity - Instead of the freedom of the will and humanity's original royal dignity, Augustine emphasizes humanity's enslavement to sin. Humanity is sick, suffering, and helpless, irreparably damaged by the fall. For that original sin, Augustine insists that it involved nothing else than Adam's prideful attempt to establish his own autonomous self-government.

As Augustine tells it, the serpent tempts Adam with the seductive lure of liberty. The forbidden fruit symbolizes “personal control over one's own will.” Not,

Augustine adds that it is evil in itself, but it is placed in the garden to teach him the primary virtue - obedience. Augustine concludes that humanity never really was meant to be, in any sense truly free. God allowed us to sin to prove to us from our own experience that “our true good is free slavery - slavery to God in the first place and in the second to God’s agent - the emperor.”²

It has only been in the past 50 years or so that biblical scholars, historians, and theologians have reread this most ancient of stories, free of the interpretations institutionalized by Paul's misogyny and Augustine’s politics.

In a groundbreaking lecture in the early 1970’s Philis Tribble was the very first to offer a challenging, refreshing, and frankly more accurate interpretation of our story from this morning read not in isolation but together with the full story of creation. Frustrated by her modern predecessors and contemporaries who continues to porport that the cunning of the serpent was actually the cunning of the woman, labeling Eve as a temptress and the inherently the weak link in this first couple.

You only have to glance up each Sunday here in our Sanctuary to be reminded of the traditional interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve in the window to my left and on the cover of our bulletin this morning. The artist who designed this window in 1960, in order to portray a snapshot of the first human couple, shows Adam receiving the breath of life from God, and Eve behind him—without a single reptile present—already scheming to get her hands on that fateful fruit.

Tribble pointed out, though it only takes a quick rereading of the story to see how obvious it should have been, that sin isn’t mentioned even once in the story, let alone original sin. Outside of the description of the tree, evil isn’t present either. There is nothing about an all-encompassing fall from grace, only as other scholars have described it, just the consequential fallout from a bad choice. And the snake is just a snake. Nothing about this creature of God indicates that he has any connection, as interpreters and poets have claimed, to satan, evil, or death. Most importantly, before their act of disobedience, nothing in the fullness of the story of the first family indicates any difference between Adam and Eve.

² Elaine Pagels, Adam and Eve and the Serpent.

Trible declared - “Adam and Eve are equal in birth. There is complete rapport, physical, psychological, sociological, and theological, between them: Bone of bone and flesh of flesh. If one has moral frailty, it is moral frailty in two. Further, they are equal in responsibility and in judgment, in shame and in guilt, in redemption and in grace. What the narrative says about the nature of woman, it also says about the nature of man.”³

It is also important to understand as scholars continued to chip away at the traditions around this story that the act of disobedience of Adam and Eve and that snake, the one that generations of Christian theologians had zeroed in on as the most defining of our human condition and our relationship to God that this story is never referred to again anywhere else in the Hebrew scriptures - even in the many places where God and God’s people wrestle with the realities and the consequences of sin and evil.

Rather than shaping the entire biblical story and the human story because it changed who we were supposed to be, it is a story, like hundreds of others in scripture, that reminds us that the Bible is most concerned with faithful responses and dealing with the consequences of making the wrong choice.

So if Eve doesn’t reshape the entire fabric of the universe in one conversation with a snake and one bite of an apple...if we are like Adam and Eve, made good while also making mistakes, what does this story and this snake have to teach us?

Mark Smith, Old Testament professor at Princeton Seminary, in his book, the *Genesis of Good and Evil*, concludes that this story is really about how human beings were created to be curious and how we have to deal with the problem of unanswered questions.

“Curiosity is not a result of the Fall, according to the Scriptures. To my mind, curiosity is also our God-given gift, calling us to reach out to God. We should strive for inordinate curiosity in service to God. At the same time, our faith need not be troubled when we cannot arrive at satisfying answers to our questions. On the contrary, having questions about God directs us and trains us to and for God. Our

³ Phillis Trible, *Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread*, 1973.

questions help to bring us into the divinely inspired story. They help make us participants in its unfolding drama, which helps inform our moral sensibility.”⁴

The dangerous thing that the serpent introduces - so risky that the story uses the device of this talking animal to make us pay attention - is also the sacredness of what it means to talk about God with one another - to ask questions, to be curious, confused and confident all at once. It is risky because this “God talk” often turns into talking ourselves and each other out of following God’s instructions - something we all are guilty of throughout our lives.

The serpent has the silly notion of outflanking the prohibition God had set before them. The snake thought it was only a rule. Even at the beginning of time, it would seem that all of God’s creatures believed that rules were made to be broken. What are the two rules that we are called to follow - to love God and to love our neighbor? Each of us has, at one moment or another, decided for ourselves what we think those two rules “really” mean and how far we believe they can be bent or even when we believe they are justified in being broken.

Sometimes, we make those choices on our own and hope we are never found out, and sometimes, we make those choices together, and like those three creatures in the garden, we talk one another into mistakes, big and small.

As people in the world, we also experience both the minor and catastrophic consequences of those mistakes just as the serpent and those first two human beings did, a world where there is pain and enmity and hardship.

We believe that God created us good and that God created us curious and complicated and free. Created to be in relationship with one another and God’s good creation - serpents and all - and that is risky and too often we hurt ourselves and each other.

But we give thanks that in response to our curiosity and complications not just our need for grace, that God, through Jesus Christ, came to walk with us, just as God walked in that Garden with Adam and Eve, to talk to us about our questions and to

⁴ - Mark S Smith - the Genesis of Good and Evil: The Fall out and Original Sin in the Bible. WJK, 2019.

help us find answers, and to convict us in the hope that pain and enmity and hardship is never what any of us were created for.

Amen.