

**“Decisions, Decisions”**

**Genesis 2.15–17 & 3.1–7 and Matthew 4.1–11**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 13 Feb 2005**

Have you ever wondered about human nature? Every major religion has something to say about it. (And most also have *contradictory* things to say about it.) So, what do you think: Is human nature intrinsically good, essentially bad, neither good nor bad, or both bad and good?

The primary historic interpretation of this important text from Genesis comes from Augustine of Hippo, the great north African theologian, whose influence over Western Christianity spans from the fourth century until today. Last year, one of our confirmands asked me what the church's doctrine of “original sin” is and how the UCC interprets it. And I figure if she was wondering about it, you might be, too. “The fall” is an expression that needs definition: it is the idea that because Adam and Eve made bad decisions about eating from the tree of knowledge, all humanity is essentially bad. It was Augustine who enunciated the doctrine of original sin, which simply put, says that “the fall” started a strain of evil which human beings have passed from generation to generation, almost as if Adam and Eve's decision caused a mutation in the human genome that persists to this day.

Some of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the Christian family view this text and Augustine's interpretation of it as absolutely central. But for other Christians (going back to Pelagius in the fourth century and coming forward to Matthew Fox and “original blessing” today) “the fall” and “original sin” aren't central at all. With the advent of modern biblical scholarship in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a German Old Testament scholar, Julius Wellhausen, described the expulsion from the garden not in a negative light, but as coming into “the intellectual knowledge of the world, the metaphysical knowledge of things in their connection, their worth or unworth, their utility or hurtfulness.”<sup>1</sup> If there is a sin present in the story, it certainly isn't that humanity acquired knowledge of good and evil: that's part of the maturation process for all humans, which is mirrored in the Genesis text.

Here's something that might surprise you: the terms “the fall” and “original sin” *never* occur in the Bible. The late German theologian Dorothee Solle expands on this by saying that the word “expulsion” *does* occur in this text. “Expulsion,” she writes, “is one phase of giving birth: the fetus is expelled from the mother's body where all that is necessary for life has been provided. It is after the expulsion that life begins – work, exertion, sexuality.”<sup>2</sup>

Interpretation has to do with where we chose to put the accent on the syllable: do we say “offENSE” or do we say “OFFense?” The way we stress the syllable can indicate whether we're talking about a crime or about football, yet on paper, they look the same. So it is with the way we interpret the stories of our faith. You know the saying, “If the only tool in your toolkit is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” So, if you're only tool is self-righteousness, everything looks like sin. Let's presume, though, that isn't our particular mindset.

Yet, if we're looking for a sin in the story, and we assume that knowledge is not a sin, perhaps we become separated from God when we flout God's intention for humanity, even when we understand God's wishes full well. We still go to war. People still starve, though the world has enough food for all. The precepts of justice that would prevent such

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<sup>1</sup> Julius Wellhausen, *History of Israel*.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothee Solle, *Great Women of the Bible in Art & Literature*, 1993.

things were enunciated by the prophets millennia ago. These conditions persist because we have made decisions that create fertile ground for them.

So, wherever you come down on the question of human nature and its inherent goodness or evil, almost all of us will acknowledge that we have free will and the capacity to make decisions that can effect many aspects of human life on this planet, for better or for worse.



I must say that the pairing of these two texts in the lectionary feels like a set-up to say “Eve is corrupt, but Jesus isn’t” or “the fall is only able to be offset by our salvation in Jesus Christ.” Each story should be read in its own context, rather than trying to conflate them into a cause-and-effect scenario across the texts. Both are stories about how we make decisions and that ways have the free will to follow God’s instruction closely or not – and that ultimately there are consequences.

So, if humanity is so awful, and if you believe that Jesus is the incarnation of God, why do you think God bothered to become enfleshed? Just to die on the cross? Or perhaps the life and teachings of Jesus show us how great humanity can be.

Human beings **do** these things:

- They willingly forgo life’s necessities when called to, especially when it involves a matter of faith. Some will even give their own lives.
- Some will renounce political influence, economic power, or both as a response to their faith.
- Others of us refuse to test God or to worship anything other than God, even as our culture sets up idols for us.

It’s interesting that Jesus is not confronted by the tempter in this midst of his everyday life. It’s not as if Satan hopped aboard a fishing boat in the Galilee with Jesus and tried to co-opt him. Jesus is in the midst of a time away, a searching time, an intensive retreat, a vision quest. His heart and mind are open, and his perceptions are being transformed by a 40-day fast.

Sometimes we need to step back in order to confront our own demons. Occasionally, we need to quiet the dull roar of our lives and pay attention in order even to see and identify the evil, because evil is often couched in subtle disguises.

Satan isn’t offering Jesus things that are inherently evil. Bread isn’t bad (unless you’re on a low-carb diet); it’s a good thing! Forcing yourself to really trust in God isn’t a bad thing either. And don’t you think it would be kind of amazing if Jesus were directly and immediately in charge of our world? But, in each of these instances, there is a demon hiding behind a good thing. And if we’re rushing around all the time, perhaps we don’t even notice that there is more to the story than bread, trust, and power, none of which is intrinsically bad. And I suspect we are oblivious to elements of our lives that are not life-giving for ourselves or for anyone else.

What are some of the demons in your life? We all have them. (When I say “demon,” I’m personifying a separation between us and God, just as when I say “God,” I’m personifying the creative, loving force that is bigger than the universe, but within each of us.) Are you unable to give up a sense of security when risk could lead you forward into growth? Perhaps you are living with an addiction that needs to be taken care of (whether it’s alcohol, food, work, power, or something that has power over you, instead of the reverse). Perhaps pride has you so far in its grip that you can never admit that you are wrong, let alone make amends to those you’ve injured. It just might be that something in your life (even a good thing) is out of balance. There is help here at Plymouth and in our community to help us grapple with our demons, but we have to identify them first.

Lent is a time when we are invited to take a step back and observe our lives, to take stock. It's not just a time to look at the ways we have fallen short, but also to appreciate the things that are going wonderfully well. Lent is like a "time-out" season that is meant to give us a spiritual breather to listen to our lives. I'd like to share a beautiful quotation from Frederick Buechner. He writes, "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace." This is an amazing cluster of sentences, so let me read it for you again: "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."



Why do you think Jesus was able to resist temptation, while Eve was not? Is it because Eve was a woman? That's been a standard line over the eons...that women are less able to resist temptation than stronger-willed men. (I don't know about you, but that isn't my experience of the women I know!) Or perhaps it's that Eve was human and that Jesus was fully divine and fully human.

So, what about human nature? If we take the idea that Jesus was fully divine, but also fully human, perhaps it was his humanity, rather than his divinity that allowed him to evade the snares set before him by the tempter. I think that if Mohandas Gandhi were being tempted by Satan, he'd have mirrored Jesus' decision-making. And we know that Gandhi was human, and that we are, too.

Where do you come down: all good, all evil, neither, or both? In some ways, the question is moot, because we have the free will to make decisions that are life-giving and growthful. And we have the prophets and the life and teachings of Jesus to guide us. And we have our mother Eve to thank for opening our eyes to the world around us!

May our Lenten journeys be filled with opportunities to listen to our lives. We are more than "sinners in the hands of an angry God." We are God's beloved; we are the sisters and brothers of the Christ, who walked the shores of Galilee as one of us. Let us journey forward, and decide well, even if it means growing up in the process.

Amen.