

The Rev. Canon Jennifer King Daugherty
Good Samaritan Episcopal Church, Sammamish
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In the Garden with God

Good morning! It is so good to worship with you today. I am thankful to Father Steve for the invitation to serve this morning and to Deacon Charissa and all of you for your hospitality.

I have lived in the Pacific Northwest for almost 20 years and one of my cherished routines is planting a spring garden. I live in Seattle, so it's not a big garden, but big enough to grow at least a little lettuce, strawberries, snap peas, herbs, and flowers. After a year of pandemic, it has been deeply gratifying to get my hands in the dirt, clear space for some fresh growing things, and witness the plants taking hold.

There is balm in the little shoots of Hosta that push up out of the ground and the tender peas that seem to appear overnight. When I lift my gaze to the spruce and hemlock that have kept watch over my neighborhood for over a century and hear the robins call out to each other, I am filled with awe and gratitude for this place we get to call home. And I am struck by how God's power, creativity, and healing is revealed in all of it.

Our Old Testament reading today is one of the most well-known passages in the Bible – the mythical story of the first man and the first woman and the garden God creates for them. One of the challenges of a familiar story is how hard it can be to hear it anew, as if for the first time. That's especially a problem for stories that have been interpreted in harmful ways, and by that, I mean ways that don't communicate Jesus' good news of a loving God who seeks life-giving relationship with all of creation. And because we only hear this story in church every six years, I want to reflect on it with you.

I don't know what you were taught about this passage from Genesis, but for many people it is the archetypal story of the "Fall of Adam and Eve," a narrative of sin and punishment that has left a long wake in religious culture. In it we find snakes as symbols of deceit and evil. The caricature of women as wily temptresses who lure men from their better judgement. And some erroneous and harmful theology that the church is still dismantling. Like the idea that sexuality is shameful, or the concept of an original sin that taints every human being from the moment of conception. This story has a powerful wake.

The part we heard today, though, isn't about individuals named Adam and Eve. They don't have names at this point in the book of Genesis. The scripture story is about the first humans and their relationship with God. The first chapter of Genesis says, "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."¹

The Hebrew word translated as humankind is “*adam*”. It’s not an exclusively masculine word, but a general word for humanity. When we hear the story of the creation of *adam*, it is a story of creation of all of humanity, including us. So, let’s try to hear it anew, as if for the first time.

In the day that God makes the earth and the heavens, God forms *adam* from the dust of the ground. God breathes breath into his nostrils; and *adam* becomes a living being. Next, God plants a garden and puts the man in it. It has every tree and plant that is pleasant to look at, maybe western hemlock or Sitka spruce or rhododendron. It also has every tree that is good for food, maybe apple, cherry, or peach, as well as the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God tells *adam* he may eat from any tree except for that last one, the tree of knowledge.

God makes animals and birds to live alongside the man, but it’s clear creation is not complete. God says to the man, “It is not good that you should be alone,” so God creates woman and *adam* recognizes that at last, he and his partner know their fullness, their wholeness, together. About this, scripture says, “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”

Can you hear that this is a story of intimate, holy, creativity? God’s own breath enlivens the first people; and, it is a story of tender relationship, as God draws them together for love and sustenance. But then the first humans start to look around at all the fruit trees in the garden, and after learning from the serpent that the tree of knowledge has food that will make them wise, they both eat some.

Exactly what kind of knowledge they gain has been debated for centuries. The early church saw this knowledge as moral freedom and responsibility – the maturity to make ethical and sound choices as well as understand the interconnectedness of all things. As the centuries passed, the knowledge of good and evil was seen as self-consciousness, which allowed the first humans to access their inner life and spurred them to ponder the meaning of their very existence.²

By the 4th century, Augustine and other church leaders saw in this story evidence of a corrupt human nature, especially as expressed through sexuality. But there was always resistance to that narrative and the scripture itself says nothing negative about gender or sexuality. It simply relates, “[When they eat the fruit], their eyes are opened and they know that they are naked; so, they sew fig leaves together and cover themselves.”

We need to understand that this new sense of nakedness goes far beyond physical exposure. Their eyes are opened to the weight of their own conscience, to the limits of their understanding, to their responsibility and need for each other. And that is frightening, so they instinctively try to cover themselves up. As if by disguising their bodies, their vulnerability is concealed, too.

Which is why it is so poignant when God comes to them in the most delightful time of the day,

when the evening breeze is cooling the air, searching for the ones carefully created in love. It is the fork in the road. The first humans are acutely aware of their fallibility and vulnerability. They forget their relationship with God and fall into shame.

“Where are you?” God asks. “I am hiding because I am naked and afraid,” the man answers. And God seems perplexed at this, “Who says you’re naked? Why do you think that?” We heard the rest of the story today. The finger pointing, the blame, and the correlation of the hardship of human life with this primal disobedience.

But let’s back up and take a look at the fork in the road, because it’s where we find ourselves all the time. At the place where we are aware of our nakedness – our limitations, our mistakes, our inability to know the future. The place where this vulnerability can so easily give way to shame, that grave sense of wrongness and isolation.

At this fork, we must remember that Jesus showed us another way. God’s desire for humanity is not fear and shame, but love for God and neighbor. Remember, “God created humankind in his image, male and female he created them.”³ As we love each other, we reveal God’s presence in the world.

So when we come to this fork in our lives, we are called to turn away from hiding and shame and remember this identity instead. Even in our messy incompleteness, we are like the first humans. We breathe God’s own breath. We know our wholeness when we are reconciled with each other. And we bear for each other the love and affirmation of the one who made us.

We are dwelling in God’s garden together. Let us give thanks for God’s creative, healing, power, and show it forth in our own lives.

Amen.

¹ Gen. 1:27.

² Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*.

³ Gen. 1:27.