

An Alternate Look at the Garden of Eden Story

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA 23452
First Sunday in Lent

Lent is a time when we focus on sin and repentance. This Lent I want to encourage you to go back to the beginning, in today's case all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Now I have never preached on the Garden of Eden, but I had the chance while talking to a rabbi to get an insight into this that may change the way you approach the story the subject of sin and how you approach Lent.

Lent is a season of repentance, fasting, what some people say making ourselves right with God and that is all fine and good. Yes we do need to examine what we have done, look at our sins, repent and return to the Lord as is described in our prayer book and the bible. However this is not about doing these things to make God love us, because God already loves us. It is about our restoring our relationship with God. Part of the challenge in all this is what you do and believe about the doctrine of original sin, how we get to heaven and how we are supposed to live while here.

Several years ago I took my EfM class down to the conservative synagogue down by the beach. I had become friends with Rabbi Mandel through an interfaith group I was part of. The topic of the Garden of Eden came up and he explained that the doctrine of original sin that we get from this story is not a part of Jewish theology. He said, "You guys invented that, we don't believe it at all." No the Garden of Eden story is all about the completion of the creation of man. You see prior to their eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge humankind was not ready for the world. Adam and Eve needed the protection of the garden. Now stop and think for a moment, if you tell a child "Don't touch that," you know full well that as soon as you turn your back you know what they will do! God was waiting for them to use their own initiative to eat the fruit and gain the knowledge of good and evil. Then not only were we ready for the greater world, but were now complete creatures with abilities far beyond the rest of the animal kingdom. We then had to be sent from the garden to fulfill what we were created for to be fruitful and multiply and have a life where we are more than the other animals in the garden. It is our knowledge of good and evil that makes us different.

Then he said something that stopped me dead in my tracks. Since Jesus was Jewish and original sin did not become a doctrine of the church until Irenaeus in the 2nd century began to write about it and especially with Augustine in the 4th century who tied it to sexual relations, then Jesus would know the Jewish interpretation. He would never have heard of original sin as we know it. Let that sink in for a moment.

This leads me into a little bit of a preview of the Sundays in Lent series. Richard Rohr in his video series Exploring an Alternate Orthodoxy challenges us to open our minds to some other ways to read scripture that are part of the Christian tradition, but not necessarily as widely known. It is in this series where I first heard him say, "Jesus came not to change God's mind about us, but to change our minds about God." You see if we set aside original sin, which is a doctrine developed by the church, this eliminates the need for a blood sacrifice to appease an angry God who is mad at us for the whole Garden of Eden episode. It changes the nature of atonement and the nature of the cross. It becomes a restoration from our side, not from God's side. This re-establishes a connection that is already there, but we need to be the ones to act for we are the ones who have broken the connection. This also moves it from a transaction to a moment of transformation.

Lent becomes an opportunity deepen our connection with the God who loves us. This is more than a relationship with God. I really don't like to use that term.

Many people run the other direction when we talk about a personal relationship with Jesus or God. This sounds like we are on a date with God and moves into what Rohr refers to as the gooey world of romantic love. In Greek the eros side of desire or even the philio, friendship. Connection with God is about agape love, the love that is central to the Trinity and to how we enter into the Trinity; a constant outpouring of love. This is limitless self-giving by God to us.

Many people have struggled and continue to struggle with an image of God where it is hard to imagine God as constantly pouring out love for us. Our culture is full of the wrath of God stuff. Just listen to the number of pastors who talk about natural disasters as God's vengeance on some group who in their mind have sinned.

In fact if you look at the confession of sin, the old confession of sin in Rite 1 you will see this image of God. Take a look at what it says. "*We acknowledge and bewail our many and manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought, word and deed, against they divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.*" How many of you grew up with that confession. How many of you said it every Sunday for years? That is why when I do Rite 1 I use the alternate. I just cannot stand up here and say that because I do not believe it.

Our Sunday night series with Richard will give you an in-depth look at the theological and spiritual reasons behind that last statement. Now that is not to say we do not live in a deeply sinful world and some of that we are not worthy language is a good thing to sit with in Lent. In fact it is part of what we are supposed to sit and pray about in Lent.

For those who were not here on Ash Wednesday let me remind you of what the prayer book says about Lent:

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith. I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

What I want you to sit with, to pray with is what is it that we do that separates or breaks our relationships with God, other people and creation. For that is our definition of sin. Then ask, what do I need to do to repent and return to the Lord. How do I re-establish that connection? There is a Lenten discipline worth spending time on. I want to close today the same way I concluded my Ash Wednesday sermon with the thoughts of Pope Francis in his call for a season of fasting this Lent, but his suggestions for fasting are quite different.

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
Fast from anger and be filled with patience
Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope
Fast from worries and have trust in God
Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity
Fast from pressures and be prayerful
Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
Fast from Selfishness and be compassionate to others
Fast from grudges and be reconciled
Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

.